



THE LONE RANCHE.

A Tale of the 'Staked Plain.'

BY

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AUTHOR OF 'THE HEADLESS HORSEMAN.'

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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THE LONE RANCHE.

CHAPTER I.

THE LAND OF THE 'LEX TALIONIS.'

DURING the quarter of a century preceding the annexation of New Mexico to the United States, that distant province of the Mexican Republic, like all the rest of the country, was the scene of constantly recurring revolutions. Every discontented captain, colonel, or general, who chanced to be in command of a district, there held sway as a dictator; and so demeaned himself, that martial and military rule had become established as the living law of the land. The civic authorities rarely possessed more than the semblance of

power; and where they did it was wielded in the most flagitious manner. The most arbitrary acts were committed, under the pretext of patriotism, or duty. No man's life was safe, who fell under the displeasure of the ruling military chieftain; and woman's honour was held in equally slight respect.

In the northern frontier provinces of the Republic, this irresponsible power of the soldiery was peculiarly despotic and harassing. There, two causes contributed to establish, and keep it in the ascendancy: one of which was, the revolutionary condition of the country, which, as elsewhere, had become chronic.

The contest between the party of the priests and that of the patriots, begun in the first days of Mexico's independence, had been continued ever since. It is in vigorous existence at the present hour; for the usurpation of Maximilian was solely due to the hierarchical party; while Mexico owes its existing republican government to the patriots —happily for the time triumphant.

The province of New Mexico, notwithstanding

its remoteness from the nation's capital, was always affected by and followed its political fortunes. When the *parti prêtre* was in power at the capital, its adherents became the rulers in the distant states, for the time being. And when the Patriots, or Liberals, gained the ascendancy, the rule was reversed.

It is but just to say, that whenever the latter were the 'ins,' things for the time went well. Corruption, though not cured, was to some extent checked ; and good government would begin to extend itself over the land. But this would only last for a brief period. The monarchical, dictatorial, or imperial party—by whatever name it may be known—was always the party of the priests ; and these, owning three-fourths of the real estate both in town and country, backed by ancient hierarchical privileges, and armed with another powerful engine—the gross superstition they had been instrumental in fostering—were always able to control events ; so that no government, not despotic, could stand for any great length of time. For all this, freedom at times

triumphed, and they became the 'outs'; but ever potent, and always active, they would soon contrive a new *pronunciamiento*, succeeded by a revolutionary change in the government. Sanguinary scenes would be enacted—hangings, shootings, garrottings—all the horrors of civil war that result from bitter and despicable revenge.

In such an uncertain state of things, it was but natural that the military should feel themselves masters of the situation, and act accordingly.

In the Northern States, however, they had still another pretext for their unrestrained exercise of power—and in none more than New Mexico. This remote province, lying like an oasis in the midst of uninhabited wilds, was surrounded on all sides by tribes of hostile Indians. There were the Navajoes and Apaches on the west, the Comanches and other Apache bands on the south and east, the Utahs on the north, and various smaller tribes distributed around it. They were all more or less hostile, at one time or another; now on terms of an intermittent peace, secured by a palaver and a

treaty; anon to be broken by some act of bad faith, leaving their braves free once more to betake themselves to the war-path.

Of course this condition of things gave the soldiery a fine opportunity to maintain their ascendancy over the peaceful citizens. Rabble as these soldiers were, and poltroons as was generally proved in every encounter with the Indians, they were accustomed to proclaim themselves the country's protectors; and assumed the power to despoil it at their pleasure.

Some few years preceding the American-Mexican war—which, as all know, gave New Mexico to the United States—these belligerent swaggerers were in the zenith of their arbitrary rule. Their great patron and protector, Santa Anna, had enjoyed a long spell of power—making him absolute dictator of Mexico, and disposer of the destinies of its people. At the same time, one of his most servile tools and successful imitators was at the head of the provincial government, having Santa Fé for its capital. This man was Manuel Armijo, whose character may be ascertained, by those curi-

ous to study it, from reading the chronicles of the times—especially the records of the prairie merchants, known as the ‘Santa Fé Traders.’ It will there be learnt, that this provincial despot was guilty of every act that should disgrace humanity; and that not only did he oppress his fellow-citizens, with the soldiery placed at his disposal to protect them from Indian enemies, but he was actually in secret league with the Indians themselves, to aid him in his mulcts and murders! Whatever his eye coveted, he was sure to obtain, by fair means or foul, by open pillage or secret theft—not unfrequently accompanied by assassination. And as with the despot himself, so with his subordinates—each in his own town or district wielding irresponsible power, and leading a life in imitation of the provincial chieftain, as he of him, the great prototype and protector of all, who held dictatorial sway in the capital of the country—Don Antonio Lopez de Santa Anna.

A knowledge of this abnormal condition of Mexican affairs will in some measure explain the history given by Colonel Miranda to his invalid

guest, as also the conduct of Colonel Gil Uraga in consorting with savages—becoming fellow-robber with the red pirates of the plain—for such in reality he was.

Despite his rapid military promotion, and the ill-gotten wealth he had acquired, the lancer colonel was anything but a happy man. Only at such times as he was engaged in some stirring affair of duty or devilry, or when under the influence of drink, was he otherwise than wretched. To drink he had taken habitually, almost constantly. It was not to drown conscience: he had none. The canker-worm that consumed him was not remorse, but the disappointment of a love-passion, coupled with a thirst for vengeance.

There were moments when he was truly miserable, his misery reaching acuteness whenever he either looked into a mirror or stood before that portrait that hung against the wall of the *sala*. For he loved Adela Miranda; and though his was love of a coarse, brutal nature, it was strong and intense as that which the noblest man may feel.

In earlier days he had believed there was a hope

that he might obtain her hand. Humble birth is no bar in Mexico, land of revolutions; where the sergeant or common soldier of to-day may tomorrow be a lieutenant, captain, or colonel. That hope had been a stimulant to his military aspirations—perchance one of the causes that first led him into crime. He believed that wealth might bridge-over the social distinction between himself and her; and in this belief he cared not how it should be acquired. For the rest, he was not ill-looking—rather handsome, and fairly accomplished. Like most Mexican *militarios*, he could boast of his *bonnes fortunes*, and often did.

These were more rare after he had received that sword-thrust from his Kentuckian adversary, driving out two front teeth, and laying open his cheek. The teeth were replaced, but the scar could not be effaced. It remained a hideous cicatrix. Even the whisker, cultivated to its extremest outcrop, would not all conceal it; it was too far forward upon his face.

It was after this unfortunate affair that he had made the proposal to Adela Miranda. He could

not help thinking it had something to do with her abrupt and disdainful rejection of him; though the young lady's little-concealed disgust, coupled with her brother's indignation, had nothing to do with this physical deformity. But for his blind passion, he might have perceived that. Fancying it so, however, it was not strange that he went half mad, and could be heard to utter fearful oaths every time he stood before his looking-glass.

After returning from that grand expedition of murder and pillage, he could gaze with a little more equanimity into the glass. From the man who had caused the disfiguration in his visage he had exacted a terrible retribution. His adversary in the Chihuahua duel was now no more. He had met with a fate sufficient to satisfy the most implacable vengeance; and often afterwards, both sober and in his cups, would Gil Uraga break out into peals of laughter—like the glee of a demon—as he reflected on the sufferings, prolonged and horrible, his hated enemy must have endured before life became extinct!

Yet all this did not appease Uraga's malevolent

spirit. A portion of his revenge was due to the second in that duel; and this was still incomplete. If it could but be satisfied by the death of Miranda himself, then there would still be the other thought to torture him—his thwarted love—even stronger than his thirst for vengeance.

He was seated in the *sala* of Miranda's house, which he now occupied as his head-quarters. He was alone; his only companion being the decanter that stood upon a table beside him—this and a cigar. It was not wine he was drinking, but the *aguardiente* of Tequila, distilled from the juice of the wild aloe. Wine was too weak to calm his troubled spirits, as he glanced toward that portrait upon the wall.

This night he had done so several times; each time, as he turned away, taking a fresh gulp of the *mezcal* and igniting another cigar. What signified all his success in villainy? What was life worth without possession of her? He would have murdered his dearest friend to obtain this—plundered him under her approving smile. ‘*Carajo!*’ it was not to be!

Where could they have gone to? Only to the United States—that asylum of rebels and refugees. In the territory of New Mexico they could not have remained. He had searched every nook and corner of it by spies; had secured the diligence of these by promises of reward. He had dispatched secret emissaries to the Rio Abajo, and even lower down—to the *Provincias Internas*. But no word of Miranda anywhere—no trace could be found either of him or his sister. ‘*Chingara!*’

As if this exclamatory phrase, that came through his teeth, too foul to bear translation, had been the name of a man, one at that moment appeared in the doorway; and after a gesture of permission to enter, stepped inside the room.

He was an officer in full uniform—one whom we have met before, though not then in military costume. It was Lieutenant Roblez, his adjutant, as also his fellow-robber and co-assassin.

‘I’m glad you’ve come, *ayudante*,’ he said, motioning the new-comer to a seat. ‘To say the truth, I am feeling a little bit lonely, and want company to cheer me. You, Roblez, are just the

man for that ; you've got such a gift for conversation.'

This was ironical, for Roblez was silent as an owl.

'Sit down,' he added ; 'have a cigar, and a *copita* of this capital stuff. It's the best that Tequila produces.'

'I've brought other company,' said the adjutant, still keeping his feet.

'Ah ! some of the officers from the cuartel ? Bring them in.'

'It is not any of them, colonel. It's a stranger.'

'Stranger or not, you're free to introduce him.. I hope,' added he in an undertone, 'it's some of the *ricos* of the neighbourhood, who won't mind taking an *albur* at *monté*. I'm just in the vein for a bit of gambling.'

'The man I wish to introduce don't look much like a *rico*. From what I can see of him in the darkness, I should say that the blanket upon his shoulders, and his sheepskin small-clothes—somewhat dilapidated, by the way—are about all the property he possesses.'

'He is a stranger to you, then ?'

‘As much as he will be to yourself, after seeing him, perhaps more.’

‘But what sort of a man is he?’

‘For that matter, colonel, he can hardly be described as a man. At least he’s not one of the *gente-de-razon*. He’s only an Indian.’

‘Ha! Comanche?’

As he put this interrogatory, the colonel-commandant gave a slight start, and looked a little uneasy. His relations with men of the Indian race were of a delicate nature; and although he was keen to cultivate their acquaintance when occasion required it, he preferred keeping all Indians at a distance, and especially Comanches, when he had no particular need for their services. The thought had flashed into his mind, that the man wanting to be ushered into his presence might be a messenger from the Horned Lizard, and with this redskin he desired no farther dealings—at least for a time. Therefore, the thought of its being an emissary from the Tenawa chief just then rather discomposed him. The reply of his subordinate, however, on this head, reassured him.

‘No, colonel, he is not a Comanche; bears no resemblance to one, only in the colour of his skin. He appears to be a Pueblo, and from his tattered costume I should take him to be a poor *peon*.’

‘Then what does he want with me?’

‘That I cannot tell; only that he has expressed a very urgent desire to speak with you. I fancy he has got something to tell you it might be important for you to hear—else I should not have promised to introduce him.’

‘You have promised?’

‘I have, colonel. He is outside, in the *patio*. Shall I bring him in?’

‘By all means; there can be no harm in hearing what the fellow has got to say. It may be about some threatened invasion of the savages; and as protectors of the people, you, *ayudante*, know it is our duty to do whatever we can to ward off such a catastrophe.’

The colonel laughed at his sorry jest; Roblez grimly joining him in the laughter.

‘Bring the brute in!’ was the command that followed, succeeded by the injunction:

‘ Stay outside yourself, till I send for or call you. The fellow may have something to say, intended for only one pair of ears. Take a sip of the *aguardiente*, light a cigaritto, and amuse yourself in the patio.’

The adjutant followed the two first of these directions; and, stepping out, left his superior officer alone in the sala.

Uraga glanced around, to assure himself that there were weapons within reach. With a conscience like his, a soul loaded with crime, no wonder.

His sabre rested against the wall, close to his hand, and a pair of dragoon pistols were upon the table within reach. Thus satisfied, he awaited the entrance of the Indian.





CHAPTER II.

EN CONFIDENCE.

ONLY a short interval, not more than a score of seconds, had elapsed when the door, once more opening, displayed to Uraga his visitor. Roblez, after ushering him into the room, withdrew; and commenced pacing to and fro in the patio. Gil Uraga felt inclined to laugh, as he contemplated the new-comer, and reflected on the precautions he had taken. A poor devil of an Indian *peon*, in coarse woollen *tilma*, tanned sheepskin trousers reaching only to the knee, bare legs below, *guaraches* upon his feet, and a straw hat upon his head—his long black hair hanging unkempt and neglected over his shoulders. A mien humble, and eyes downcast, like all of his tribe. Yet it

could be seen that, on occasion, those eyes could glow with a light that might indicate danger—a fierce fiery light, such as may have shone in the orbs of his ancestors when they rallied around Guatimozin, and with clubs and stakes beat back the spears and swords of their Spanish invaders.

At the entrance of this unpretentious personage into the splendidly-furnished apartment, his first act was to pull off his tattered straw hat, and make humble obeisance to the gorgeously-attired officer who sat beside the table.

Up to this time Uraga had supposed the man to be a stranger; but when the broad brim of the *sombrero* no longer cast its shadow over his face, and his eyelids became elevated through increasing confidence, the colonel sprang to his feet with an exclamatory phrase that told of recognition.

‘Manuel,’ he said; ‘you are Manuel, the servant of Don Valerian Miranda?’

‘*Si, señor coronel; a servicio de V*’ (‘Yes, colonel; at your excellency’s service’), was the

reply humbly spoken, and accompanied with a second sweep of the straw hat—as gracefully as if given by a Chesterfield.

At sight of this old acquaintance, a world of wild thoughts rushed crowding through the brain of Gil Uraga—conjecture, mingled with hopeful anticipation.

For it came back to his memory, that at the time of Miranda's escape, some of his domestics had gone off with him, and he remembered that Manuel was one of them. In the Indian standing so respectfully before him, he saw, or fancied he saw, the first link of a chain, that might enable him to trace the fugitives. Manuel should know something about their whereabouts; and Manuel was now in his power for any purpose—for life or for death.

There was that in the air and attitude of the Indian, that told him there would be no need to resort to compulsory measures. The information he desired could be had without this; and he resolved to seek it, by adopting an opposite course.

‘My poor fellow,’ he said, ‘you look distressed — as if you had just come from a long toilsome journey. Here, take a taste of something to recuperate your strength; then you can repeat what you’ve got to say. I presume you’ve some communication to make to me, as the military commandant of the district. Night or day, I am always ready to give a hearing, to those who bring information that concerns the welfare of the State.’

As he finished speaking, the colonel poured out a strong glass of the distilled mezcal juice; which Manuel took from his hand; and, nothing loath, spilled between his two rows of white glittering teeth.

Upon him, unused to it, the fiery liquor was almost instantaneous in its effects; and in a moment after, he became freely communicative—if not so disposed before. But he had been; therefore the disclosures that followed were less due to the alcohol, than to a passion far more inflammatory.

‘I’ve missed you from about here, Manuel,’

said the colonel, making his approaches with skill.

‘Where have you been all this while?’

‘With my master,’ was the peon’s reply.

‘Ah, indeed; I thought your master had gone clear out of the country?’

‘Out of the settled part of it only, señor.’

‘O! he is still, then, within Mexican territory? I am glad to hear it. I was sorry to think we had lost such a good citizen, and true patriot, as Colonel Miranda. True, he and I differed in our views as regards government; but that’s nothing, you know, Manuel. Men may be bitter political enemies, yet good friends for all that. By the way, where is the colonel now?’

Despite his apparent stolidity, the peon was not so shallow as to be misled by talk like this. With a full knowledge of the situation—forced upon him by various events—the badinage of the brilliant *militario* did not for a moment blind him. Circumstances had given him enough insight into Uraga’s character, and position, to know that the latter’s motives somewhat resembled his own. He knew that the colonel-commandant was in love

with his young mistress, as much as he himself with her maid. Without this knowledge he might not have been there—at least not with so confident an expectation of success in the design that had brought him—for design he had, deep and traitorous.

Despite the influence of the aguardiente, fast loosening his tongue, he was yet a little cautious in his communications ; and not until Uraga had repeated the question did he make reply to it. Then came the answer, slowly and reluctantly, as if from one of his long-suffering race, who had discovered a mine of the precious metals, and was being put to the torture to denounce it.

‘ Señor coronel,’ he said, ‘ how much will your excellency give to know where my master now is ? I have heard that there is a very large bounty offered for Don Valerian’s head.’

‘ That is an affair that concerns the State, Manuel. I have nothing personally to do with it. Still, as an officer of the government, it is my duty to do all I can towards making your master a prisoner. I think I might promise some reward to

any one, who could produce a fugitive rebel, and bring him before the bar of justice. Can you do that?

‘No, your excellency ; not so much as that. I’m only a poor peon, and not powerful enough. To attempt making a prisoner of Don Valerian Miranda would cost me my life, and the lives of many more like me. It will take strong soldiers to do that.’

‘Talking of strength, my good Manuel, you don’t seem to have quite recovered yours. You must have had a very fatiguing journey. Take another *copita* ; you are in need of it, and it will do you good.’

Pressure of this sort put upon an Indian peon is rarely resisted. Nor was it in this case. The Pueblo readily yielded to it, and drank off another glass of the aguardiente.

Before the strong alcohol could have fairly settled in his stomach, its fumes were ascending into his skull.

The cowed cautious manner—a marked characteristic of his race—soon forsook him ; the

check-strings of his tongue became fully relaxed; and, with nothing remaining before his mind save the one scheme of securing Conchita, he betrayed the whole secret of Colonel Miranda's escape—the story of his retreat across the Staked Plain, and his residence in the *Lone Ranche*.

When he told of the two guests who had strayed to the solitary valley, and, despite his maudlin talk, minutely described the men, his listener sprang up with an oath, accompanied by a gesture of such violence as to overturn the table—sending cigars, decanter, and glasses to the floor!

He did not look to see the damage righted; but with a loud shout, that reverberated throughout the whole house, summoned in his adjutant, and after him the corporal of the guard.

‘*Cabo!*’ he said, addressing himself to the latter in a tone at once vociferous and commanding, ‘take this man to the guard-house, and see you keep him there—so that he be forthcoming when wanted. If he be missing, *cabo*, you shall be shot ten minutes after I receive the report of

his disappearance. Take the word of your colonel for that.'

From the way that the corporal laid hold of the surprised peon—almost throttling him—it was evident he did not intend running much risk of being shot for letting his prisoner escape ; while the Indian appeared suddenly sobered by the rough treatment he was receiving. But he was still too much astonished to find speech for protest ; dumb, and without making the slightest resistance, he was dragged out through the open doorway—to all appearance more dead than alive.

‘Come, ayudante,’ cried the colonel-commandant, as soon as the door had closed behind the guard corporal and his prisoner. ‘Drink ! let us drink ! first to revenge. It is not accomplished as yet. No, it has all to be gone over again ; but it is sure now—surer than ever. After that, we shall drink to my success in love. That is not hopeless, yet. She is found again—found, ayudante ! Ah ! my pretty Adela !’ he exclaimed, staggering towards the portrait, and in tipsy glee contemplating it ; ‘you thought to escape me—

but no. No one can get away from Gil Uraga—friend, sweetheart, or enemy. You shall yet be mine, enfolded in these arms—if not as my wife, as something that will serve just as well—my *margarita!*!"





CHAPTER III.

A MYSTERIOUS DESPATCH.

URAGA did not long continue his carousal in company with Roblez. He had an important matter upon his mind; and, after the excitement caused by the peon's communication had to some extent given way to calmer reflection, he dismissed his adjutant, who went back to the military *cuartel*.

Though taking part with his colonel in many a criminal transaction, and having a share in the spoils, Roblez left all the planning to the superior officer; who on his side had secrets he did not always divulge to his subordinate. He was despotic even in his villanies, and brooked no interference with his schemes.

And he had now conceived one of a nature he did not care to make known to any man, not even

to Roblez, until such time as he might think it befitting the latter should know it. It was not that he dreaded any treachery on the part of his fellow-freebooter. There was no danger of that. They were too much mutually compromised to tell tales upon one another. Besides, Roblez, although a man of courage, had a strong fear of Uraga ; for he knew him to be one who—his hostility being once gained, or his vengeance provoked—would stop at nothing short of complete and terrible retribution. Hence the control which his colonel had over him ; so great, that while using him as an aid in his deeds of spoliation, he was still only rewarded by a limited share in the profits.

Uraga's chief motive for concealing many of his schemes from his adjutant was due more than aught else to a moral peculiarity. He was of a strangely-constituted nature ; secretive to the last degree—a quality on which he prided himself. It was his delight to deal in this habit, whenever the opportunity offered—just as it is with the cheat and the detective policeman. Secrecy gave him pleasure.

After the adjutant had left him, he remained for some time alone, reflecting ; and then, calling the corporal of the guard, he directed the latter once more to bring the Indian before him.

The prisoner—still wondering why he had been made such—soon appeared, in charge of the corporal ; who was commanded to close the door and remain in waiting outside. Thus closeted, Uraga put the peon through a fresh process of examination ; which elicited other facts in relation to those about whom he was so much interested. In short, he made himself minutely acquainted with everything that had occurred—the peon having been once more pacified, and his tongue for the second time untied, by a fresh lubrication of alcoholic liquor.

Among other things, he was questioned about the situation of the valley where the refugees had found an asylum ; the direction, distance, and means of access to it; in short, its complete topography.

These questions he could answer satisfactorily, and did.

He was then strictly examined about the per-

sonages there residing, especially the two strangers who had come as guests—when they had arrived, their reception, behaviour, and doings.

These last interrogatories disclosed to Uraga a state of things—one fact in particular, that caused the blood to run rushing through his heart, and brought over his countenance a look of such bitter malignity, that the traitor, in fear for his own safety, repented having told him of it. It was the tender relations that had been established between Frank Hamersley and the *Señorita Adela*, of which the peon was aware. He could not have been otherwise without closing his eyes; and while occupied in his espionage after *Conchita* he had kept them continually open.

When the cross-questioning was finished, and he had told all he knew, Uraga once more committed him to the charge of the guard-corporal; at the same time promising that his incarceration was only precautionary, and would not be for long.

As soon as he was taken out, Uraga betook himself to a writing-desk that stood on one side of the *sala*, and opening it, he sat down, drew

forth a sheet of writing paper, and commenced scribbling upon it.

What he wrote had the appearance of an epistle ; but whatever it was, the composition occupied him some little time. Occasionally he stopped using the pen, as though pausing to reflect on what should be written.

When it was at length completed, apparently to his satisfaction, he folded the sheet, thrust a stick of sealing-wax into the flame of the candle, and sealed the document ; but without using any seal-stamp. A small silver coin taken from his pocket gave the necessary impression. There did not appear to be any name appended to the epistle, if one it was ; and the superscription now written upon the outside showed only the two words, '*Por Sanchez*' (For Sanchez).

A spring-bell that stood on the top of the *secretario* being touched, a man entered the room —one of the ordinary domestics.

' Go to the stables,' commanded his master, ' or the corral, or wherever he is, and tell Pedrillo that I want him. Be quick about it ! '

The man bowed, and went off.

‘It will take them—how many days to reach the Tenawas’ town, and how many back to the Pecos?’ soliloquised Uraga, pacing the floor, as he made his calculations. ‘Three, four, five; no matter. If before them, I can wait till they come.—Pedrillo !’

Pedrillo had made his appearance; an Indian of the *tame* tribe, not greatly differing from the man Manuel, and of a countenance quite as sinister. But we have seen Pedrillo before: since he was one of the two muleteers who had conducted the *atajo* carrying the goods from the despoiled caravan of the prairie traders.

‘Pedrillo,’ commanded his master, ‘catch a couple of the best horses in the corral—one for yourself, the other for José. Have them saddled, and get yourselves ready for a journey of two weeks, or so. Make all haste with your preparations. These made, come back here, and report yourself.’

The muleteer disappeared; and Uraga continued to pace the floor, still apparently buried in a mental measurement of time and distance. At

intervals he would stop before the portrait on the wall, and for a second or two gaze upon it. This seemed to increase his impatience for the reappearance of Pedrillo.

He had not very long to wait. The scrip and staff of a New Mexican traveller of the peon class is of no great weight or complexity. It takes but a short while to prepare it. A few *tortillas* and *frijoles*, a head or two of *chile colorado*, half-a-dozen onions, and a bunch of jerked-beef (*tasajo*). Having collected these comestibles, and filled his *xuaje* or water-gourd, Pedrillo reported himself ready to take the road, or trail, or whatever sort of path, and on whatever errand it might please his master to dispatch him.

‘ You will go straight to the Tenawa town—Horned Lizard’s—on the south branch of the Goo-al-pah. You can find your way to the place, Pedrillo ? You’ve been there before ?’

Pedrillo nodded in the affirmative.

‘ Take this.’ Here Uraga handed him the sealed epistle. ‘ See that you show it to no one you may meet, before getting beyond the settlements. Give

it to the Horned Lizard, or you may hand it to Sanchez himself—it's for him. You are to ride night and day, as fast as the horses can carry you. When you've delivered it, you needn't wait, but come back—not here, but to the Alamo. You know the place, where we met the Tenawas some weeks ago? You will find me there. *Vaya!*"

On receiving these instructions, Pedrillo vanished from the room—a strange sinister cast in his oblique Indian eye telling that he knew himself to be once more, what he had often been before—an emissary of evil.

Uraga took another turn or two across the floor; and then, seating himself by the table, once more sought solace for his tortured soul by drinking deep of the *mezcal* whisky of Tequila.





CHAPTER IV.

CONVALESCENT.

THANKS to the skill of the old army-surgeon, Hamersley's strength became rapidly restored to him. A tender nurse had doubtless something to do with his quick recovery, as likewise the regaining of his spirits. Long before becoming convalescent, he had ceased to lament the loss of his property ; and only felt sadness when he thought of his brave followers, who had fallen in the endeavour to protect it from the savage pillagers. Day by day the retrospect of the red carnage lost something of its horrifying hues—the too vivid tints becoming gradually blended with thoughts more tranquil, and beams more benignant.

They were not the beams of the sun, whose

lucid light from a sapphire sky shone daily down into that sweet oasis of the desert. Not these that were effecting the metamorphosis, so soothing to his spirit; though in truth was it a lovely spot, into which a chance, at first so sinister, but afterwards so fortunate, had conducted him. The vale itself, with its soft clustering groves, exhibiting the varied foliage of evergreen oaks, pecans, and wild china-trees; its arbours of mulberry trellised with grape-vines; its rock-bound rivulet, here forming a tranquil sheet smooth as the surface of a mirror, there leaping off into the dance of the foaming cascade, like a string of merry maidens with white dresses floating behind them—all these offered an enchanting landscape. Placed as it was in the midst of the brown barren desert, strangely contrasting with the sterility around, it resembled some exquisitely-painted picture set in a plain frame, or a bright jewelled decoration upon a coat ragged and russet. In truth was it a delectable spot—worthy to be the abode of an angel.

The young prairie merchant could well fancy it to be so inhabited. So far from having changed

his mind, since he penned that word on the piece of paper left upon the palmilla, he was only the more confirmed that he had written the truth. If Adela Miranda was not an angel, she was a being of perhaps equally pleasant companionship—at least so thought Frank Hamersley, before he had been a week under the same roof with her.

Hers was a beauty of a rare and peculiar kind; not common anywhere, and only seen among the *doncellas*, in whose veins courses the blue blood of Andalusia; withal, a beauty that might perhaps rebel against the standard of taste set up in the icy northland. The dark tracery upon her upper lip might have looked a little bizarre in a ball-room, amid Saxon belles; just as her sprightly spirit might have offended the sentiment of a strait-laced Puritanism.

It had no such effect upon Frank Hamersley. On the contrary, to the young Kentuckian, the child of a land above all others free from conventionalism—to a nature like his, attuned to the picturesque—these peculiarities were but points to pique his fancy, and fix it. They had done this.

Long before leaving his couch in convalescence, there was but one world for him—that whose atmosphere was breathed by Adela Miranda; but one being in it—herself. It must have been decreed by Heaven that these two hearts should come together. Else, why in such a strange place brought into juxtaposition, and by such a singular contingency of circumstances?

Nothing seemed to stand between them now—not even the zealous watchfulness of a brother. Don Valerian appeared to neglect every thought of fraternal duty—if such had ever occurred to him. His time was chiefly taken up in roving around the valley with Walt Wilder, or making more distant excursions in the companionship of the *ci-devant* ranger, who narrated to him many a strange chapter in the life-lore of the prairies. When Walt chanced to be indoors, he also had something to occupy him, which hindered him from too frequently intruding upon his invalid comrade, or the nurse who so tenderly watched over him. For the colossus had succumbed to a similar fate. He too had become the victim of a

love-passion. A pair of jet-black eyes, set in a countenance of bistre-colour, with a row of pearly teeth, and just a touch of damask-red blushing out upon the cheeks, had done the business for Walt. Such were the eyes, teeth, and complexion of Conchita, the little half-Indian damsel, who, long domesticated with the family of the Mirandas, had followed the fortunes of her young mistress into the heart of the Llano Estacado.

Quite as little dreaded was the intrusion of Don Prospero. Absorbed in his favourite study of Nature, the *ancien medico* passed most of his hours in communion with her. More than half the day was he out of doors—chasing lizards into their crevices among the rocks—impaling insects on the spikes of the wild maguey plant, or plucking such flowers as seemed new to the classification of the botanist. In these tranquil pursuits, as Don Valerian had said, he was perhaps happier than all around—even those whose hearts throbbed with that supreme passion, so full of sweetness, but often the very acme of bitterness. As for the two Pueblo *peons*, Manuel and Chico; no one

thought of them. Clothed in their coarse woollen *tilmas*, the humble garb of servitude, they went about their daily toil and tasks, at meeting of their white masters doffing their palm-plait hats, and making humblest obeisance.

Yet one of these men—he who was called Manuel—showed at times a very different disposition. He possessed naturally a sinister, almost fierce, cast of countenance, that at once challenged antipathy. Only a knowledge of the fidelity he had shown to Colonel Miranda and his sister could have hindered Don Valerian's guests from disliking him. He did not seem to like them, though there was no declared exhibition of it. This he would not have dared, however intense his hostility. But although unobserved, a strange fire might have been seen at times burning in his eyes—a fixed, steady spark, like that which gleams and glows in the orbs of a rattlesnake about to spring upon its prey. It was when his glance rested upon the girl Conchita—especially when he saw her in converse with, and listening too tenderly to, the speeches of the Texan ex-ranger.

If in that remote spot there were loves refined and romantic as those of Romeo and Juliet, there was also a passion grotesque and terrible as that of Quasimodo. It was this passion of the Pueblo peon that had impelled him to the act of ingratitude and treason already chronicled.





CHAPTER V.

A STRICKEN GIANT.

ABOUT a week after the young Kentuckian had risen from his invalid couch, and was able to be abroad, Walt Wilder, touching him on the sleeve, requested to have his company at a distance from the dwelling.

Hamersley acceded to the request, though not without some wonderment. In the demeanour and movements of his colossal comrade there was something odd, almost mysterious. As this was unusual with Walt, he had evidently some communication to make of an important character.

Not until they had got well out of sight of the cabin, and beyond earshot of any one inside or around it, did Walt say a word ; and then only, after they had come to a stop in the heart of a

thick grove of hackberries, where a prostrate trunk offered them the accommodation of a seat.

Sitting down upon it, and motioning his companion, still with the same mysterious air, to do likewise, the ex-ranger at length began to unburden himself.

‘Frank,’ said he, ‘I’ve brought ye out hyar to hev a leetle spell o’ talk on a subjeck as consarns this coon very consid’able.’

‘What subject, Walt?’

‘Wal, it’s about weemen.’

‘Women! why, Walt Wilder, I should have supposed that would be the farthest thing from your thoughts, especially at such a time and in such a place as this.’

‘Wal, Frank, ef this chile don’t misunnerstan’ the sign, they ain’t the furrest thing from *yur* thoughts, at this hyar time an’ place.’

The significance of his comrade’s remark caused the colour to flush up to the cheeks of the young prairie merchant, late a little pale. He stammered as he made evasive rejoinder :

‘Well, Walt; you wish to have a talk about

women. I'm curious to hear what you have to say of them. Go on—I am listening.'

'Ye see, Frank, I'm in a sort o' a quandary wi' a petticoat, an' I want a word o' advice from ye; you're more 'parienced in thar ways than me. Though a good score o' year older than yurself, I hain't hed much to do wi' weemen, 'ceptin' Injun squaws, an' now an' agin a Pueblo gurl up to Taos an' Santer Fé. But them scrapes wan't nothin' like thet Walt Wilder hev got inter now.'

'A scrape! What sort of a scrape? I hope you haven't—'

'Ye needn't hope, Frank Hamersley; it air past hopin', an' past prayin' for. Ef this chile know anythin' o' the sign o' being in love, he hes goed a good ways along the trail. Yis, Frank, too fur to think o' takin' the back-track.'

'On that trail, eh?'

'Thet same whar Cyubit sots his leetle feet, 'ithout neer a moccasin on 'em. Yis, kummarade, this coon, for oncest in his kureer, air in a difeequelt; an' thet difeequelt air love, sure sartin'.'

Hamersley gave a shrug of surprise, not unaccompanied with a slight show of incredulity. Walter Wilder in love! And so earnestly! With whom could it be? As he could himself think of only one woman worth falling in love with—either in that solitary spot, or anywhere on earth—it was but natural his thoughts should turn to her. Only for an instant, however. The idea of having the rough hunter for a rival was preposterous; and Walt, pursuing the topic, soon convinced him that he had no such lofty aspiration.

‘Yis,’ continued he, ‘she’s been an’ goed an’ dud it—thet air gurl Concheeter. Them black eyes o’ her’n hev shot clar through this chile’s huntin’-shirt, till thar’s no peace left the inside o’ it. I hain’t slep a soun’ wink for mor’en a week o’ nights; all the time dreemin’ o’ the gurl, as ef she war a angel a hoverin’ above me. Now, Frank, what im I ter do? That’s why I’ve axed ye to kum out hyar, and hev this confaberlation.’

‘Well, Walt; you shall be welcome to my advice. As to what you *should* do, that’s clear enough; but what you may or can do will depend

as much upon Miss Conchita as yourself—perhaps a little more. Have you spoken to her upon the subject?

‘Thar hain’t yit been much talk atween us—i’deed not any talk, I mout say. Ye know I can’t parley thar lingo. But this chile hev approached her wi’ as much skill as he iver did pronghorn or buffler. An’ if sign signerfy anythin’, she wan’t bad skeeart about it. Contrariways, Frank; she sort o’ showed she’d be powerful willin’ to freeze to Walt Wilder.’

‘If she be so disposed, there can’t be much difficulty about the matter. You mean to marry her, I presume?’

‘In coorse I dus—that for sartin’. The feelin’s I hev torst that gurl air diffrent to them as one feels for Injun squaws, or the queeries I’ve danced wi’ in the fandangoes up to Taos. Ef the gurl ’ll consent to be myen, I meen nothin’ short o’ the hon’rable saramony o’ marridge—same as atween man an’ wife. Now, Frank, what do ye think o’ t?’

‘I think you might do worse than get married. You’re old enough, Walt, to become a Benedick;

and Conchita appears to be just the sort of girl that would suit you. I've heard it said, that these Mexican women make the best of wives—when married to Americans.'

Hamersley paused in his speech, as if the reflection was pleasant to him.

'There are several things,' he continued, 'that will be necessary for you to arrange, before you can bring about this happy conclusion. First, you will have to get the girl's consent; and I should think also that of Colonel Miranda and his sister. They are, as it were, her guardians, and to a certain extent responsible for her being properly bestowed. Last of all, you will have to obtain the sanction of the Church. This, indeed, may be your greatest difficulty. To make you and your sweetheart one, a priest, or a Protestant clergyman, will be needed; and I should think neither can be had very conveniently here—in the heart of the Staked Plain.'

'Durn both sorts!' exclaimed the ex-ranger, in a tone of vexation. 'Ef't wan't for the need o' 'em jest now, I shed say the Staked Plain war

lucky in hevin' neyther. Why can't this gurl an' me kum thegither 'thout any senseless saramony? For my part, I want no mumblin' o' purayers over it. An' why shed thar be, supposin' we hev our mutooal consents, one to the t'other?

'Impossible, Walt. That is not marriage, such as would lawfully and legally make you man and wife.'

'Dog-gone the lawfulness or legullity o' it! Priest, or no priest, I want thet gurl for my wife; an' I tell ye, Frank Hamersley, I've made up my mind to hev her. Don't ye think the old doc ked do it? He air a sort o' a purfessional.'

'No, no; the doctor would be of no use in that capacity. It's his business to unite broken bones, and not hands or hearts. But, Walt, if you are really determined on the thing, I think I can offer you a hope of being able to carry out your determination in a correct and legitimate manner. Your must be patient, however, and consent to wait awhile.'

'Gie us your explanashun, kumrade!'

'Well; our host here, Colonel Miranda, has

promised to return with us to the States. That must be after you and I have made our trip to New Mexico. Whether we be successful in getting trace of my lost property or not, we shall come back this way, and he will go with us across the plains. Of course all the others—including your Conchita—will be of the party. Once in the United States, you and she can get tied, to both your hearts' content; she by a priest, if she prefer it, and you by a Protestant clergyman.'

'Dog-goned ef I care which,' was the ready rejoinder of the giant. 'Eyther'll do; an' one o' 'em 'ud be more nor serficient, ef 'twar left ter me. But hark'ee, kumrade!' he continued, his face assuming an astute expression; 'I'd like to be sure o' the gurl *now*—that is, her way o' thinkin' on't. Fact is, I've made up my mind to be sure; so that thar may be no slips or back-kicks.'

'Sure, how?'

'By gettin' the gurl's promise.'

'O, there can be no harm in that. I can see none.'

'Wal, I'm glad you think so; for I've sot my

traps for the thing, an' baited 'em too. Thet air part o' my reezun for fetchin' ye out hyar. She's gin me the promise o' a meetin' 'mong these hackberries; an' may kum at any minnit. Ye see, Frank, I'm agoin' to perpose to her; an' I want to do it in a reg'lar straightforward way. As I can't talk thar lingo, an' you kin, I knowd ye wudn't mind transleetin' atween us. Ye won't, will ye?"

'I shall do so with the greatest of pleasure, if you wish it. But don't you think, Walt, you might learn what you want to know without any interpreter? She may not like my interference in an affair of such delicate nature. Love's language is said to be universal; and by it you should be able to understand each other.'

'So fur's thet's consarned, I reck'n we do understan' each other. But this gurl bein' a Mexikin, she may have querry ways; an' I want her promise guv in tarms, from the which she kin hev no chance to take the back-track—same as I meen to give myen.'

'All right, Walt; I'll see you get that sort of promise, or none.'

‘Hooraw for you, Frank! This chile air agoin’ to put the thing stiff an’ strong. You transleet it jest in the same way.’

‘Trust me, it shall be done, *verbatim et literatim*.’

‘That’s the sort!’ joyfully exclaimed Walt; thinking that the *verbatim et literatim*—of the meaning of which he had not the slightest conception—should be just the very thing to secure the consent of Conchita.





CHAPTER VI.

A PROPOSAL BY PROXY.

THE singular bargain between the prairie merchant and his ci-devant guide had just reached its conclusion, when a rustling among the branches of the hackberries, accompanied by a soft footstep, fell upon their ears.

Looking around, they saw Conchita threading her way through the grove. Her cautious and stealthy tread would have told of an 'appointment,' even had her design not been already known. Her whole bearing was that of one *en route* to an interview with a lover; and the sight of Walt Wilder, whose gigantic form now stood erect to receive her, proclaimed him to be the one thus favoured.

It might have appeared strange that she did

not start back on seeing him in company with another man. She neither did this, nor showed any shyness; evidence that the presence of the third party was a thing pre-understood and arranged between herself and Walt.

She came forward without farther show of timidity; and after curtseying to the 'Señor Francisco,' as she styled him, took her seat upon the log from which Hamersley had arisen; Walt clasping her hand, and gallantly conducting her to the best place.

There was a short interregnum of silence, which Conchita's sweetheart endeavoured to fill up with a series of gestures, that might have appeared uncouth, but for the solemnity of the occasion. This considered, they were full of grace and dignity.

Perhaps not deeming them so himself, Walt soon sought relief, by appealing to his interpreter in the following words:

'Dog-gone it, Frank! ye see I can't make the dear gurl understand' me. So you palaver to her. Tell her right off what I want. Say to her that

I hain't got much money, but a arum strong enuf to purTECT her, thro' thick and thro' thin, agin the dangers o' the mountain an' the puraira, grizzly bars, Injuns, an' all. She sees this chile hev got a big body; ye kin say to her that his heart ain't no great ways out o' correspondence wi' it. Then tell her in the eend, that this body, an' arum, an' heart air offered to her; an' ef she'll except 'em, they shall be hern, now, evermore, an' to the death—so help me God !'

As the hunter completed his proposal, thus emphatically ended, he brought his huge hand down upon his buckskin-covered breast with a slap like the crack of a cricket-bat. Whatever meaning the girl might have made out of his words, she could have had no doubt about their earnestness—if judged by the gestures that accompanied them.

Hamersley could not help feeling a strong provocation to mirth; but, with an effort, he subdued his risibility; and faithfully, though not very literally, translated his comrade's proposal into Spanish.

When, as Walt supposed, he had finished, the

hunter stood to await the answer—his huge frame trembling like the leaf of an aspen. He continued to shake all the while Conchita's response was being delivered; though the first words might have assured, and set his nerves at rest, could he only have understood them. . But he knew not his fate, till it had passed through the tedious transference from one language to another—from Spanish to his own native tongue.

‘Tell him,’ was the answer of the young girl, given without any show of insincerity, or the slightest assumption of timidity; ‘tell him that I love him as much as he does me. That I loved him from the first moment of seeing him; and shall love him to the end of my life. In reply to his honourable proposal, say to him, *yes*. I am willing to become his *wife*.’

When the answer was translated to Walt, he bounded at least three feet into the air, with a shout of triumph, resembling that he might have given over the fall of an Indian foe. Then, rushing towards the girl, he threw his great arms around her; lifted her from the ground as if she

had been a child's doll; held her to his broad beating bosom; and imprinted a kiss upon her lips, the concussion of which might have been heard far beyond the borders of the hackberry grove.

The spectacle, though touching upon the grotesque and ludicrous, was yet pleasing to him who witnessed it. For it struck a chord in his own heart, sympathetically attuned.

‘What a pity,’ he reflected, ‘that there is no church near, no priest nor other legalised authority, to bind two lovers together in the bonds of holy wedlock !’

Had there been so, he might have been thinking farther, that more than one couple was ready to submit themselves to the chain.

In the midst of his reflections came the thought, that the presence of more than two individuals on that spot could be no longer either advantageous or desirable. His part had been performed; and he withdrew stealthily, without saying a word.

As he passed out through the grove, he fancied

he saw a form skulking among the trunks of the trees—the form of a man. Twilight was now on; and under the branches of the hackberries there was an obscurity almost equal to that of night. What he saw might have been some straying animal—or it might have been only fancy. His thoughts were running in a new channel, that carried him on towards the dwelling; for there one would be awaiting him, in whose presence, with its divinity of refinement, he would soon forget the uncouth spectacle of love—almost its burlesque—at which he had been assisting.

The form seen cowering in shadow was no fancy of Frank Hamersley, but one of real flesh and blood. It had followed Conchita from the house; and, though in human shape, had glided after her like a coyote, or a snake. It was the peon Manuel, who had thus entered the hackberry grove, and who had been there ever since, though observed only by Hamersley on passing out of it.

The skulker had seen all, and heard everything: the proposal, and its response—even that

kiss so loudly pronounced between the lips of the sweethearts. More afterwards ; enough to make him stand for a time with his macheté half drawn, his eyes flashing with the fires of a furious revenge—the revenge of jealousy.

For a moment Walt Wilder's life might have been deemed in danger. Fortunately for him, the hand of his unseen enemy was stayed by a coward's heart, as with the hope of compassing his rival's death by means equally effective, and with less risk to himself. To kill the Texan on the spot, with Conchita as a witness, would be to forfeit his own life. And if he killed both, it would break his own heart. Besides, he might fail in the first blow ; and then the giant would have him under his heel, and crush him like a reptile.

He held his hand, and permitted them to depart in peace—the woman he wildly loved, and the man he as madly hated.

But after they had gone out of the grove, he took his seat on the log they had left ; and there pondered upon a scheme of vengeance, sure as the steel of the assassin, and far safer. He had

already conceived and reflected upon it. Now he became fixed in the determination to execute it.

As he passed through the trunks of the trees, sauntering back towards the ranche, he might have been heard muttering to himself words of menace—at least they would have appeared so, to any one who could have heard and understood them.

No one heard, and no one could have understood them—except his fellow peon, Chico—for they were spoken in the Pueblo tongue. Even Chico would scarce have comprehended their import. For all this, they had a meaning portentous—as proved in that interview with Uraga, that occurred but a short while afterwards.





CHAPTER VII.

BROTHER AND SISTER.

‘I HAVE news for you, niña—news that, I am sure, will be pleasant.’

It was Colonel Miranda speaking to his sister, one morning after his guests had gone abroad.

‘What news, Valerian?’

‘We shall at last have an opportunity of leaving this lone place. Our residence here, away from all society, has been a harsh experience; for you, dear sister, a terrible one.’

‘In that, brother, you mistake. You know I never cared a straw for what the world calls “society.” I’ve always liked better, to be free from its restraints and conventionalities. Give me Nature for my companion—Nature in her wildest moods.’

‘Here you have had them—I should think, to a surfeit.’

‘No, not to a surfeit. I have never been happier than in this wilderness home. How different from my convent school—my prison, I should rather style it! O, this life is charming; and if I were to have my way, it should never come to an end. But why do you talk of leaving this place? Do you think the troubles are over on the Del Norte, and we could go there safely? I don’t wish to go there, brother. After what has happened, I hate New Mexico, and would prefer staying all my life in the Llano Estacado.’

‘I have no thought of going back to New Mexico: for there despotism is stronger than ever. Armijo now governs without the slightest responsibility; while the scoundrel Uraga lords it around Albuquerque. The more danger that he is actually owner of our house, which has been made over to him by confiscation. Besides, the reward is still offered for my head, or the discovery of my whereabouts. No, Adela; when I speak of an opportunity of leaving this

place, I do not think of going back to the Del Norte.'

'Where then, brother ?'

'In the very opposite direction—to the United States. Don Francisco counsels me to do so ; and I have yielded to his counsel.'

Adela seemed less disposed to offer opposition to this change. She did not protest against it.

'I thought Señor Hamersley was himself going to the Del Norte ?' she said ; and then listened with apparent eagerness for the answer.

'He is ; but only to stay for a short time. He will then return to his own country ; and proposes that we all accompany him. Dear sister, we cannot do better. There seems no hope of our unfortunate country getting rid of her tyrants—at least, for a long while to come. When the day again arrives for our patriots to pronounce, I shall know it in time to return. Now, we can only think of safety ; and although I don't wish to alarm you, niña, I've never felt safe here. Who knows but that Uraga may yet discover our hiding-place—even here in the heart of the desert ? He has

his scouts everywhere, and we now know of his being in league and fraternity with the savages. Every time Manuel makes a visit to the settlements, I have my fears of his being followed back. In any case, it will be better to go with Don Francisco. He and I have talked the matter over, along with the Texan and our doctor. We are all of one mind about it. Since his arrival, the Ranger has been exploring every nook in the neighbourhood. He is of the opinion, that our little stream here is one of the head-waters of the great river of Texas—the Brazos de Dios. He knows Texas well, having spent the greater part of his life there. He proposes that we should descend this stream, trusting to his guidance to conduct us to some of the settlements below. What can be better, or safer ?'

‘But have you not said that Señor Hamersley intends going on to the Del Norte ?’

‘Upon that he is determined. I have told him that there is danger—have pointed it out to him ; he only makes light of it. He has been robbed, and has reason to suspect who have been

the robbers. By going to the Del Norte, he hopes to find a clue to their identification. Even if he should, there will still be danger for him.'

' Dear brother, do try to dissuade him !'

If Hamersley could have heard the earnest tone in which the appeal was spoken, it would no doubt have given him gratification.

' I have tried ; but to no purpose. It is not the loss of his property—he is generous and does not regard it. His motive is a holier one : his comrades have been killed—murdered ; he says he must seek the assassins and obtain redress—their punishment—even at the risk of sacrificing his own life. I have tried, dear Adela ; and found it useless to attempt restraining him.'

' Noble man ! A hero ! Who could help loving him ?'

This was not spoken aloud, nor to her brother. It was a thought secret and silent, heard only within the heart of her who conceived it.

' If you wish,' continued Colonel Miranda, ' I will see him, and again endeavour to dissuade him from this reckless course ; though I know there

is little hope. Stay; a thought strikes me. Suppose that you try, sister. A woman's words are more likely to be listened to; and I know that yours will have weight with Don Francisco. He looks upon you as the saviour of his life, and might yield to your request.'

'If you think so, Valerian—'

'I do. I see him returning to the house. Remain where you are, sister. I shall send him in to you.'

* * * * *

With a heart heaving and surging, Hamersley stood in the presence of her who was causing its tumultuous excitement. Into that presence he had been summoned, and knew it. Her brother, point-blank, had spoken the invitation: 'Don Francisco, my sister wishes to see you;' to which 'Don Francisco' had readily, though tremblingly, responded.

What was to be the import of an interview unexpected, unsought, apparently commanded?

It seems superfluous to say that the young prairie merchant was by this time fondly, passion-

ately, in love with Adela Miranda. Even the portrait, seen hanging against the wall at Albuquerque, had predisposed him to such a passion. The features of Morisco-Andalusian type—so unlike those in his own land—the description of the girl given by her brother, coupled with the incidents that led to friendly relations with that brother—all piquing to curiosity—had sown the first seeds of a tender sentiment. It had not died out. Neither time nor distance had obliterated it. Far off—even when occupied with the pressing claims of business—that portrait-face had often appeared upon the retina of his memory, and more than once in the visions of dreamland. Now that he had looked upon it in reality—seen it in all its living beauty, surrounded by scenes strangely wild as its own expression, amid incidents as romantic as his fancy could have conceived—now that he knew it to be the face of her who had saved his life, is it any wonder that the tender sentiment first evoked by the portrait should become a strong passion at sight of herself?

It had done so—a passion all-pervading—and

the young Kentuckian trembled as he reflected on the possibility of its being unreciprocated and unreturned.

He had been calculating the chances in his favour every hour since consciousness became restored to him ; and upon a word spoken in that hour had he rested more hope than in all that had occurred since. Ever in his ear rang that sweet soliloquy, spoken under the impression that he heard it not.

There had been nothing afterwards—neither word nor deed—to strengthen the belief that he was beloved. The beautiful girl had been a tender nurse—a hostess apparently solicitous to give satisfaction — nothing more. Was the soliloquy he had heard but a trite speech, unfelt and unmeaning ? Or had it been but an illusion, born from the still lingering distemper of his brain ?

He longed to know the truth. Every hour that he remained ignorant of it, he was in torture equalling that of Tantalus or Sisyphus ; yet he feared to seek the revelation, for in it might be ruin. How he envied Walt Wilder his common love,

its easy conquest, and somewhat coarse declaration ! What would he not have given to himself receive a similar answer ! A score of times he had been on the eve of asking the same question. His comrade's success should have emboldened him. It did not. There was no parallelism between the two parties.

He had delayed seeking the knowledge he most desired to possess ; but it was now nearing the last moment, and he had arrived at a resolution. He was soon to take departure from that spot, where he had experienced so much pleasure, mingled with an imaginary pain. What was in the future before him—happiness or misery ? Joy delicious, or the wildest of woe ? A word from Adela Miranda would decide which—a word of one syllable. He had at length made up his mind to ask for, and have it. In this mood was he, when summoned to her side. No wonder he came trembling into her presence.

‘ *Señorita*,’ he said, despite all that had passed addressing her with distant respect, ‘ your brother has told me you wish to speak with me.’

‘I do, Don Francisco,’ she replied, without quail in her look, or quiver in her voice. A judge upon the bench could not have looked more unmoved at the culprit before him.

In returning her glance, Hamersley felt as if his case was hopeless. The thought of proposing at once passed from his mind. He simply said :

‘May I ask, señorita, what it is you wish to speak to me about?’

‘About your going back to the Rio del Norte. My brother tells me such is your intention. We wish you *not* to go, Don Francisco. There is danger in your doing it.’

‘It is my duty.’

‘In what way? Explain yourself.’

‘My men have been slain—murdered, I may say—thirteen of them in all, comrades and followers. I have reason to believe that by going to Albuquerque I may discover their assassins, at all events their chief, and perhaps bring him to justice. I intend trying, if it cost me my life.’

‘Do you reflect, Don Francisco, what your life is worth?’

‘To me not much.’

‘It may be to others. You have at home a mother, brothers, sisters; perhaps one still dearer?’

‘No—not at home.’

‘Elsewhere, then?’

Hamersley was silent under this searching inquisition.

‘Do you not think that danger to your life would be unhappiness to hers—your death her misery?’

‘My dishonour should be more so; as it should and would to myself. It is not vengeance I feel towards those who have murdered my comrades—only a desire to bring them to justice. I must do it, or else proclaim myself a poltroon—a coward, with a self-accusation that would give me a lifelong remorse. No, señorita; it is kind of you to take an interest in my safety. I already owe you my life; but I cannot permit *you* to save it again, at the sacrifice of honour, of duty, of humanity.’

There was just a sprinkling of pique in this speech, with a slight savour of bravado. Hamersley

fancied himself being coldly judged, and counselled with indifference. Had he known the warm wild admiration that was struggling in the breast of her who conversed with him, he would have made answer in a different fashion.

Soon after he was talking in an altered tone, and with a changed understanding; and so also was she, hitherto so difficult of comprehension.

‘Go,’ she said—‘go, and get justice for your fallen comrades, and, if you can, punishment for their assassins. But remember, Don Francisco! if it bring death to you, *there is one who will not wish to live after you.*’

‘Who?’ cried the Kentuckian springing forward, with heart and eyes aflame—‘who?’

He scarce needed to ask the question. It was already answered by the emphasis on the last words spoken.

But it was again answered in a more tranquil tone; the long dark lashes of the speaker veiling her eyes with modest resignation as she pronounced her own name,

‘*Adela Miranda.*’

From poverty to riches, from the dungeon to bright daylight, from the agonised struggle of drowning to that confident feeling when the feet stand firm upon the strand—are all sensations of happiness. They are but dull in comparison with the delirious joy, which is the lot of the despairing lover, on finding that his despair has been a fancy, and his passion is reciprocated.

Such an experience had Frank Hamersley as he heard the name pronounced. It was like a cabalistic speech, throwing open to him the portals of an earthly Paradise.





CHAPTER VIII.

SOLDIERS ON THE MARCH.

‘WHAT do you think they are?’

‘Sogers, for sartint. I kin see the glint o’ thar buttons an’ ‘couterments.’

‘But what could soldiers be doing out here? There are no Indians on the Staked Plain; besides, if there were, such a small troop as that, considering it must be of Mexicans, would not be likely to venture out after them.’

‘It mout be only a advance gurd, an’ thar’s a bigger body o’ ‘em behint. We’ll soon see. Anyways, we mustn’t let ‘em spy *us*, till we know what sort o’ varmints they air. Yis; sogers they be—a troop o’ Mexikin cavalry. Thar’s no mistakin’ them ragamuffins. They’re lanceers too. I kin make out thar long spears stickin’ up over

thar heads, an' the bits o' ribbon streamin' out behint. Pull yur mule well back in among the bushes. The direcshun they're follerin' oughter fetch 'em clost to hyar. 'Twon't do to let 'em git sight o' us. Mexikins though they be, thar mout be danger in 'em. 'Tall eevents, it's best to hev the advantage o' fust knowin' who they air, an' what they're arter.'

This brief dialogue occurred between two men standing beside two mules, from which they had just dismounted. They were Frank Hamersley and Walt Wilder. The place was by the edge of a clump of stunted 'black-jacks.' It was about fifteen miles west of the valley of the Lone Ranche, from which they had ridden that morning. They were on their way to the settlements on the Rio del Norte, for the purpose already declared by the young prairie merchant.

The hour was midday, and they had stopped for their noon halt under the shade of the dwarf but umbrageous oaks, where they were enjoying the comestibles their late host had provided for their journey. While thus agreeably engaged,

Walt's eyes, ever on the watch, had detected a suspicious sign, that appeared in a due westerly direction. At first it seemed only a cloud of dust, not bigger than a blanket; gradually, however, it became more extended, and soared higher above the plain. It might be the swirl of the wind acting on the dry desert sand—a thing of common occurrence on the high plateaux amid the New Mexican mountains. But it had not the rounded pillar-like form of the 'whirlwinds,' and the practised eye of the ex-ranger did not mislead him to suppose that it was one. He could see that the cloud had a dense dark head, and evidently a nucleus of something more solid than dust. Besides, it was approaching nearer, not with irregular rapid drifting, as the sand-pillars do, but in a slow stately fashion, that told it to be something different.

As the two men stood guessing as to its nature, shading their eyes from the sun overhead, all at once its true character became disclosed to them. A puff of wind coming down from the north caused the soaring cloud for a moment to

sway sideways, showing underneath a body of mounted men. It was then that Walt Wilder saw the 'glint' of accoutrements, that had led him to pronounce it a party of 'sogers.'

That they were Mexicans was easily deduced. There could be no others in that part of the country. It is true, a band of Texan cavalry had once crossed the plains at a point not very distant from where they were—the ill-starred 'Santa Fé Expedition'—though few of these wore anything like a soldier's uniform; besides, they did not carry weapons such as Walt now saw. Those advancing were evidently a troop of Mexican lancers, and could be nothing else.

If there had been any doubt about it, it was soon set at rest. As the hunter had observed, they were approaching in a direction to bring them close to the *motte* of oaks; and in less than half an hour after, they were nearly opposite it, the dust-cloud still shrouding and partially concealing them from view. Still there was no difficulty in making out the character of the individual forms composing the troop. It was a small one of

between twenty and thirty files marching in twos. They were regular Mexican *lanzeros*, carrying their lances sloped, with the pennons draggling down along the shafts; for there was not a breath of air to float them. Their yellow cloaks could be seen, folded and strapped over the croups behind them. Their horses were of the small Mexican mustang kind; but one at the head of the troop, ridden by an officer, in all likelihood the leader, was a large animal, evidently a *frison*, or horse of American breed.

Upon this horse the eyes of Walt Wilder became fixed, as soon as the animal was near enough to attract special observation. A half surprised, half interrogative expression passed over his features, as he gazed through the obscuring dust. Suddenly it changed to one of certainty, while a quick exclamation came from his lips:

‘Great God, Frank, look thar!’

‘What is it, Walt?’

‘Don’t ye see nothin’?’

‘Nothing more than what I see—a troop of Mexican lancers mounted on mustangs.’

‘Mustangs! That’s no mustang—that ‘ere critter at the head o’ the line. Amerikin hoss he—*yur* hoss, Frank Hamersley!’

It was Hamersley’s turn to be astonished. Sure enough the horse ridden at the head of the troop was the same he had been compelled to abandon, at the base of the cliff, while making escape from the pursuing savages.

A flood of light flashed into the minds of the two men crouching within the shadow of the black-jacks. At once were recalled the suspicious circumstances observed by them in the fight—the bearded men among the Indians—and at the same time what their late host had said in relation to the ruffian Uraga.

Was it he who was heading the troop? Who else could it be?

They could see that the man who rode the large horse was tall and bearded, just as Hamersley knew Uraga to be, and just like the Indian whom Walt had suspected of being a counterfeit. Everything seemed to confirm the conjectures they had formed.

Now rushed other conjectures into the brain of both, coupled with apprehensions almost agonising. What was the purpose of this military expedition? Whither was it bound?

As they saw it filing before their eyes, these questions were too easily answered. It was heading direct for the valley from which they had themselves come, and going as if guided!

‘Yes,’ said Walt, ‘thar going straight for the valley, an’ the Ranche too. Thar’s no guess-work in that sort o’ travellin’. Thar’s a guide along wi’ ‘em, an’ thar’s been a *treetur*!’

‘Who could it be?’

‘Who? Why, who but that Injun Manooel, as went off ‘bout a week ago to fetch thar things? Durnashun—yonner’s the skunk hisself! Don’t ye see that thing ridin’ on a mule at the eend o’ the line?’

Hamersley looked; and there, sure enough, was the figure of a man on muleback, differently dressed from the troopers. The *tilma* and straw hat were such as he had seen worn by the domestics of Miranda; and although the distance was

too great for the features to be recognised, the dark complexion, with the distinctive points which the young Kentuckian remembered, left no doubt of its being the peon Manuel.

No farther explanation was needed now. All was too painfully clear. The peon had turned traitor, and disclosed the secret of Colonel Miranda's place of exile. He was guiding the enemy direct to the spot.

Nor was there any time required to conjecture what must be the result. Don Valerian was in danger, not only of his liberty, but his life ; and along with him Don Prospero.

But it was not of either Frank Hamersley and Walt Wilder were at that moment thinking. Close conjoined with their fate was that of others, far dearer to the two Americans ; and to these were their apprehensions turned keenly and absorbing every thought.

Hamersley breathed hard as the dark shadow swept over his soul, and spoke excitedly ; though his voice was husky, like that of a man in the act of being strangled. He gasped out :

‘They’re going straight for the place! Adela! O God! O God!’

‘Yis, they’re boun’ for thar,’ said Walt in a calmer voice, but speaking in a tone equally anxious and desponding. ‘That’s thur errand out hyar, for sartint. The durned treetor’s been tempted by the reward offered for ’em as poleetical refooges; and ef the varmint at thar head be him as ye’ve told me ’bout, the Lord have mercy on Miranda. Poor young fellur! He air the noblest o’ Mexikins I iver seed, an’ desarves a better fate. Hang or shoot him, they’ll be sure ter do. Thet’s Armijo’s way, whensomdever he or Santy Anney’s in the ’scendant. As for the poor ole doc, he may git off by sarvin’ a spell in prison; but the gurls—’

Hamersley’s groan interrupted the speech—his comrade perceiving how much it pained him.

‘Wal, we won’t speak o’ *them* now. One thing—they ain’t a-goin’ to be rubbed out like the men. From what the saynoreeta’s brother sayed, thar’s a reezun for treatin’ her diffrent; an’ if thar’s to be no longer a brother to purtect her, I

reck'n she's got a friend in *you*, Frank, an' hyar's another o' the same, like the psalms o' Davit.'

Walt's words sounded hopefully. Hamersley felt it, but said nothing. His thoughts were too sad for speech. He only pressed the hand of his comrade in a silent and grateful grasp.

'Yis,' continued the ex-ranger with increased emphasis; 'I'd lay down my life to save that young lady from harum, as I know you'd lay down yourn; an' thet air to say nothin' o' Concheeter. This chile ain't never been much guv to runnin' arter white weemen, an' war gen'rally content to put up wi' a squaw. But sech as them! As for yur gurl, Frank, I don't wonder yur heart beats like a chased rabbit's, for myen air doin' the same. Wal, niver fear! Ef thar's a hair o' eyther o' thar heads harmed, you'll hear the crack o' Walt Wilder's rifle, an' see its bullet go into the breast o' him as harms 'em. I don't care who, or what he air, or whar he be; nor I don't care a durn—not the valley o' a dried buffler-chip—what may come arter—hangin', garrottin', or shootin'. At all risks, them creeturs air boun' to be pur-

tected—or revenged. I swear it, by the Eternal !'

'I join you in the oath,' pronounced Hamersley with increased fervour, once more exchanging a hand-squeeze with his companion. 'Yes, Walt; the brave Miranda may be sacrificed; I fear it must be so; but for his sister, there is still a hope that we may save her; and surely Heaven will help us. If not, I shall be ready to die. For me, death would be easier, far easier, to bear than the loss of Adela !'

'An' for this chile the same wi' Concheeter !'





CHAPTER IX.

A HALT.

FRANK HAMERSLEY and the ex-ranger had truly divined the object of the military expedition, and who was its leader. It was Uruga who was riding across the plain, with a picked party of his lancers; their destination the valley of the Lone Ranche; and their purpose to make prisoners of Miranda, with all who might be found sharing his solitary exile with him.

The information given by the peon Manuel had been acted upon immediately—the expedition having started from Albuquerque before sunrise on the following day; and the traitor was now along with it, acting as guide.

Uruga had brought only a small troop of his *Lanzeros*—Lieutenant Roblez, his adjutant, in

immediate command of them. The colonel-commandante did not deem it necessary to make show of a larger force. Any Indians likely to be encountered in that section of country would be Mezcalero Apaches, and of these he had no fear. Fifty men in all filed after him ; surely enough to make prisoners of those he intended to take.

‘I don’t think we need fear any resistance,’ he remarked to his subordinate, as the double-peaked hill loomed up over the level of the plain, and the guide admonished them that the valley lay just beyond it.

‘No,’ rejoined the adjutant. ‘If there should be, what then ?’

‘Then we make clean work of it. No quarter to any of the *men*. Cut them down ; lance the life out of them !’

‘The old doctor too ?’

‘Him as the rest. We want no survivors—at least none of the male kind—to tell tales afterwards ; I only wish they would show fight. As you know, Roblez, there are reasons why these *Tejanos* should be silenced. I’m sorry I’ve

brought this horse with me. I didn't think of it. They'll be sure to remember him. Still, that can be explained by our saying that he was brought into the valley of the Del Norte, and I became his owner by purchase.'

'If you have any doubts that way, *mio coronel*, why not act as if they were to resist us ?'

'It would be dangerous. Remember, *ayudante*, we're not now acting with the Horned Lizard and his painted freebooters. Our fellows here have eyes in their heads, and tongues between their teeth. A tale might get out that would bring us into disgrace with the government; and it into trouble with the *Americanos*. No, no; we mustn't make fools of ourselves, by such naked work as that. We make prisoners of them, if they give us no other pretext. After that, I've thought of a way of disposing of them. The Horned Lizard will help me; and I have now a messenger on the way to him. As regards Don Valerian Miranda, he's safe enough. His affair can be arranged by a court-martial; which will act promptly, but withal perfectly legal. Besides,

there is a reason why I may not want him executed right off. I may yet save his life, if he will do something to deserve it. *Hola, alferez!*" he added, calling to the youngest commissioned officer of the troop. "That Indian Manuel; bring the brute on to the front here."

The peon who rode upon a mule in the rear, on being told that he was wanted, spurred his animal forward, and placed himself by the side of Uraga.

In the countenance of the man there was an expression of conscious guilt, such as may be seen in one not hardened by habitual crime. Now that he was drawing nigh the scene, where those betrayed by him would suffer, he had more than once indulged in a train of reflections, tinged with regret for what he had done. Don Valerian had been a kind master to him, and the Doña Adela an unexceptionable mistress. He was bringing ruin upon both.

Then would spring up thoughts of Conchita and her colossal sweetheart—now, as he knew, her *fiancé*—and the memory of that episode in

the shadowy grove, coming fresh before his mind, would again fire his soul with black jealousy, and sweep out of it every thought of regret or repentance. Even had these triumphed, it was now too late. From the moment of his having parted with the information, he had lost the control of his secret; and he to whom it had been communicated did not treat him with the slightest regard; but on the contrary was constantly calling him a brute. The traitor was no longer acting as a voluntary guide. He performed his office, as with a sword pointed at his breast, or a pistol aimed at his head.

‘Sirrah,’ said the colonel, as he drew up, ‘are those the two peaks of which you spoke?’

‘The same, your excellency.’

‘And you say that the path leads between them?’

‘Right down into the valley, Señor coronel.’

‘You are sure there is no other?’

‘No other that leads up to the plain here. Beyond where the ranche is, at the lower end of the valley, as I’ve told your excellency, the

stream runs out. There's a path there. It is through a cañon, between very high cliffs. It goes on to the plains below; but it is a long way, and crooked.'

'How long do you think it?'

'*Ay de mi!* a very long way; at least a *jornada*.'

'Could horses travel by it?'

'Surely they could. When I was out through it once, with Don Valerian, we were both of us mounted on mules. But horses could go too; though it's full of rocks, and not easy for the animals to make way.'

'Can the cañon be reached from the plain above?'

'No, your excellency; not anywhere. On either side the cliffs rise up hundreds of feet above the water, and there's no slope to get down by. The only way one could travel it, is by entering from the outside plain, and coming on up through the valley, or by going down. That would be a good day's journey; maybe more, your excellency.'

'Enough,' said Uraga, as if satisfied, and yet

with somewhat of a dissatisfied air. 'Go back to your place, sirrah,' he added.

The peon, making obeisance by raising the straw hat from his head, again fell back to the rear of the troop.

'There's a question, Roblez,' said the colonel, 'what had we best do here? If we go down into this hole in broad daylight, we may have our long ride for nothing, and find the place empty for our pains. From what he has told me, the house can be seen from the defile through which we have to pass, of course also the defile from the house, and ourselves making the descent.'

'Carrambo! that will never do, colonel.'

'Certes, not. Since it appears there are two doors to this trap, the birds may escape out of one while we are closing the other. I know the sort of cañon the peon speaks of. It's a very common kind on the edges of the Llano Estacado. He says it can't be entered except from the plains below, or through the valley itself. I've no doubt he is right; and therefore what is to be done? Can you suggest anything, Roblez?'

‘ Could we not gallop forward, and surround the house before they can get out of it ? ’

‘ Nothing of the kind. Down the defile there can be no galloping, from what the Indian has told me. On the contrary, it will be just as much as our horses can do to *crawl* down it. To cut off their chance of escape below, would be to make sure of them. But it would take time—a couple of days at the least.’

‘ I think there’s no need of that delay,’ said the adjutant reflectingly. ‘ We may avoid it by not entering the valley till after the sun has gone down. Then we can ride on to the house, and surround it in the darkness. As they are not likely to be expecting any guests, there can be no difficulty in our surprising them. Let it be after midnight, when they’ll be all asleep ; the fair Adela, no doubt, dreaming of some one. Poor thing ! she must have had a lonely six months of it amid these solitary scenes.’

‘ *Alto !* ’ commanded the colonel, a dark cloud crossing his countenance, as if the words of his subordinate stirred up some unpleasant souvenir.

‘We shall do as you suggest, Roblez. Let the men dismount, *alferez*,’ he added, in command to the ensign. ‘Keep the horses under the saddle, and be ready to move forward at a moment’s notice. See that the guide is closely watched; by the way, you may as well put manacles upon him.’

After issuing these orders, Uraga himself dismounted; gave his horse to a trooper to hold; and then, along with his adjutant Roblez, walked off to some distance from the troop—so that the two might perfect their plans of action, without danger of their ideas becoming exposed to the cognisance of their comrades.





CHAPTER X.

STALKING THE STALKERS.

THE spot upon which the lancer troop had halted was within view of the grove that gave concealment to the two Americans. Five miles lay between; in the clear atmosphere of the tableland looking less than three. The individual forms of the soldiers could be distinguished, and the two men who had taken themselves apart. The taller of these was easily identified as the commanding officer of the troop. The other was Roblez.

‘If they’d only keep thar places till arter sun-down,’ muttered Wilder, ‘I ked settle the hul bizness. This hyar gun the doc pursented to me air ‘bout as good a shootin’-iron as I’d care to git my claws upon, an’ most equal to my own ole rifle. I’ve gin her all sorts o’ a trial down

thar in the valley, an' know she's good for plum-center at a hundred an' fifty paces. Ef yonner skunks as air squattin' out from the rest 'ud but jest stay thur till the shades o' night 'ud gie me a chance o' stealin' clost enuf, thar's one o' 'em 'ud never see daylight agin.'

'O!' exclaimed Hamersley, with a sigh of despair, and yet half hopeful, 'if they would but remain there till night, we might still head them into the valley, time enough to give warning.'

'Don't you have any sech hopes, Frank; thar's no chance o' that. I kin see what they're arter in makin' stop. They've made up thar mind not to 'tempt goin' inter the valley till they kin git a trifle o' shadder aroun' them. They think that ef they're seen afore they git up to the house, the critters inside might 'scape 'em; thurfor they purpiss approaching the shanty unobsarved, by makin' a surround o' it. That's thar game. Cunnin' o' them, too—for Mexikins.'

'Yes, that is what they intend doing, no doubt of it. O heaven—only to think we are so near, and yet cannot give them word, or sign, of warning!'

‘Can’t be helped. We must put our trust in Him that hez an eye on all o’ us—same over the desert purairas an’ mountains, as whar people are livin’ in lurge cities. Sartin, we must trust in Him, an’ let things slide a bit, jest as He may direct ’em. To go out from our kiver now ’ud be the same as steppin’ inter the heart o’ a puraira fire. Them fellurs air mounted on swift hosses, and ’ud ketch up wi’ these slow critters o’ mules in the shakin’ o’ a goat’s tail. Thurfor, let’s lie by till night. ‘Tain’t fur off now; an’ ef we see any chance to git down inter the valley, we’ll take devantage o’ it.’

Walt’s companion could make no objection to the plan proposed. There was, in fact, no alternative but accede to it; and they remained watching the movements of the lancer troop, now stationary upon the plain.

For several hours were they thus occupied; until the sun began to throw elongated shadows upon the ground. It wanted about an hour of its setting, when the Mexicans again mounted their horses and moved onward.

‘I told ye so,’ said Walt. ‘Thar’s still all o’ ten miles atween them an’ the valley, an’ they’ve mizyured the time it’ll take ‘em to git thur—an hour or so arter sundown. Thar ain’t the shadder o’ a chance for us to creep ahead o’ ‘em. We must keep the kiver till they’re clear out o’ sight.’

And they did keep the cover until the receding horsemen—for a long time presenting the appearance of giants under the magnifying mirage—gradually became shrunken to their natural dimensions in the cool air of the evening, and at length faded from view under the purple gloaming of the twilight.

Not another moment did Hamersley and the hunter remain within the grove; but, springing to their saddles, pushed on after the troop.

Night soon descending, with scarce ten minutes of twilight, covered the Staked Plain with an opaque obscurity, as if a shroud of black crape had been thrown over it.

There was no moon, not even stars, in the sky; and even the twin *buttes* that formed the portals of the valley-path were no longer discernible.

But Walt Wilder required neither moon, nor stars, nor mountain peaks, to guide him for such a short distance. Taking his bearings before starting from the palmilla grove, he rode on in a course, straight as the direction of a bullet from his own rifle, until the two peaks came into view, darkly outlined against the leaden sky.

‘We mustn’t go any furrer, Frank,’ he said, suddenly pulling up his mule; ‘leastwise, not a-straddle o’ these hyar conspikerous critters. Whether the sogers hev goed down inter the valley or no, they’re sartin to hev left some o’ the crowd ahint by way o’ keepin’ century. Let’s picket the anymals out hyar, an’ creep forrad afoot. That’ll gie us a chance o’ seein’ ‘ithout bein’ seen.’

The mules were disposed of as Walt had suggested, when the dismounted men continued their advance.

First walking erect, then in a bent attitude, then crouching still lower, then as quadrupeds on all fours, and at length crawling like reptiles, they made their approach to the defile that led down to the valley.

They did not enter it ; they dared not. Before getting within the gape of its gloomy portals, they heard voices issuing therefrom. They could see tiny sparks of fire—the coal glowing at the tips of ignited cigars. They could tell that there were sentries left there—a line of them stretching across the ravine, guarding it from side to side.

‘ It ain’t no use tryin’, Frank,’ whispered Wilder ; ‘ ne’er a chance o’ our gittin’ through. They’re stannin’ thick all over the groun’. I kin tell by thar seegars and palaverin’. A black snake kedn’t make way among ’em ‘ithout bein’ seen.’

‘ Then what are we to do ?’ asked Hamersley in a despairing whisper.

‘ We kin do nothin’ now—’ceptin’ go back an’ git our mules. We must move ’em out o’ the way afore sun-up. ’Tain’t no manner o’ use our squattin’ hyar. I kin tell what’s been done. The main body’s goed below ; them we see’s only some left to guard the gap. Guess it’s all over wi’ the poor critters in the Ranche, or will be afore

we ked do anythin' to help 'em. Ef they ain't kilt, they're captered by this time.'

Hamersley could scarce restrain himself from uttering an audible groan. Only the evident danger kept him silent.

'I say agin, Frank, 'tair no use our stayin' hyar. Anythin' we ked do must be done elsewhar. Let's go back for our mules, fetch 'em away, an' see ef we kin clomb one o' these hyar mounds. Thar's a good skirtin' o' kiver on the top o' 'em. Ef the anymals can't git up, we kin leave them in some ravine, an' go on to the top ourselves. Thar we kin see all that passes. The skunks 'll be sartin to kum past in the mornin', bringin' thar prisoners. We'll see who's along wi' 'em, and kin foller thar trail; ay, if it must be, hell'ard.'

'I'm ready to do as you direct, Walt. I feel as if I had lost all hope.'

'That be durned! Thar's allers a hope, while thar's a bit o' breth in the body. Keep up heart, man; think o' how we wur 'mong them wagguns. That oughter strengthen yur gizzern. Niver say

die, till yar dead ; thet air the doctryne o' Walt Wilder.'

As if to give an illustrative proof of it, Walt caught hold of his despairing comrade by the sleeve, and with a pluck turned him round, and impelled him back to the place where they had parted from the mules.

The animals were released from their pickets ; then led silently, and in a circuitous direction, towards the base of one of the buttes.

Its sides appeared too steep for even a mule to scale them ; but a boulder-strewed ravine offered a place for their concealment.

There they were left, their lariats affording sufficient length to make them fast to the rocks ; while a *tapado* of the saddle-blankets secured them against hinneying.

Having thus disposed of them, the two men kept on up the ravine ; reached the summit ; and sat down among the cedar scrub that crowned it—determined to stay there, till the morning sun should declare the 'development of events.'



CHAPTER XI.

THE SONG INTERRUPTED.

‘DEAR Adela, the doctor and I have been comparing notes, and have come to the conclusion, that we’re both a little out of sorts. Take your guitar, sister, and see if a song will cheer us.’

‘Please, niña! It’s true what Don Valerian says. Your sweet voice will, no doubt, be of great service, and do much to cure the malady from which we are both suffering.’

‘What malady, *mio medico*?’ asked the young lady, looking at the doctor with some surprise.

‘One from which you, señorita—fortunately for yourself—are exempt. Don’t you see that neither one of us is smoking? We haven’t had a cigaritto in our mouths during the whole of the day.’

‘I have noticed that. But why, Don Prospero? Why, Valerian?’

‘For the best of all reasons, sister ; we haven’t got such a thing. There isn’t a cigaritto within twenty miles of where we sit—unless our late guests have made a very short day’s journey. I gave the great Texan the last pinch of tobacco I had—to cheer him on his way.’

‘Yes, señorita,’ added the doctor ; ‘and something as bad, if not worse. Our worthy friends, the Americanos, have helped in reducing our stock of Paseño wine. I believe it’s about as low as the tobacco. So, you see, we stand in need of a song to cheer us. Fortunately your sweet voice is left. Neither of the strangers have been able to deprive us of that.’

A smile, with a significant twinkle in Don Prospero’s eye, told that his last words had somewhat of a double meaning.

‘O,’ replied the señorita, ‘a song ? Half dozen at your service ;’ and she started towards her guitar—having hastily arisen from her seat, to conceal the slight blush which the doctor’s speech had called up into her cheeks.

‘About the Paseño wine,’ said Miranda : ‘it’s

not quite so bad as you make it out, doctor. It is true that the skin of mezcal is quite collapsed ; for the throat of the Tejano appeared as difficult to saturate as the most parched spot upon the Staked Plain. However, there's still left to us a flask or two of the grape-juice—enough, I hope, to keep us alive till Manuel makes his return with our monthly supplies. What can be delaying the rascal ? He's had time to have been to Albuquerque, done all his bargainings, and got back three days ago. I hoped to see him here before our guests left—so that I could have better provisioned them for their journey. As it is, they run a fair risk of being famished. I did all I could to induce them to wait for him ; but Don Francisco would not. The noble fellow is in a sad state of mind about his murdered companions ; and no wonder. He says he cannot rest, till he obtains satisfaction. I fear he will not find it, where he has gone to seek it ; but only bring himself into a new danger. *Valga me Dios !* It is sad—horrible—to reflect on such a state of affairs.'

The reflection was evidently this to Adela. As

she sat listening to what her brother said, her eyes shone with a sombre solicitude. The guitar escaped from her hands, and dropped to the floor —by the concussion breaking one of its strings !

It looked like an omen of evil ; and a quick glance passing between them, told that all three so regarded it. Don Prospero hastened to pick up the guitar ; and with a gallant speech to the señorita, commenced reuniting the snapped string. As if to chase the unpleasant reflection still farther away, he added :

‘About provisioning your late guests for their journey, Don Valerian—I did that myself.’

‘How do you mean, doctor ?’

‘You know that beautiful rifle I bought from the American merchant in Santa Fé ?’

‘Of course I do. You brought it here with you ; and I know that you’ve lent it to our friend the Texan.’

‘No ; I gave it him. It was so pleasant to see how he could use it. *Carrambo !* he could kill a bird with it, and not spoil the skin, or even ruffle a feather. I am indebted to him for some

of my best specimens. So long as Don Gualtero carries that gun, you need have no fear that either he or his companion will perish from hunger—even on the Llano Estacado. Now, niña, I've set the string to rights, and we await your song.'

'Stay a moment, sister,' interrupted Don Valerian; 'wait till we've had a *copita* of wine. We all seem as if we wanted a little of the grape juice to make our hearts lighter.'

Saying this, he stepped into a closet where the stores were kept—soon returning with a red earthen jar which contained the delicious vintage of El Paso, and three small calabash-cups, that among the rude utensils of the ranche did service as drinking-glasses. A copita having been taken by each of them, the young girl took up her guitar; and commenced singing one of those imitable lays, for which the language of Cervantes is so celebrated.

It was a patriotic chant, intended to cheer the spirits of the two refugees in their solitary exile. Yet, despite its stirring strain, the hearts of those who listened to it could not help feeling

sad ; as if some boding fear still held possession of them. She who sang was under a similar influence ; and, in spite of all her efforts, her voice came not in its accustomed volume and sweetness ; while the strings of the instrument seemed all out of tune.

All at once, while she was in the middle of the song, the two bloodhounds, that had been lying on the floor at her feet, sprang from their recumbent position, giving utterance to a fierce growl ; and then rushed simultaneously out through the open door.

The singing was instantly brought to an end ; while Don Valerian and the doctor rose hastily to their feet.

The bark of the watchdog in some quiet farm-yard, amidst the homes of civilisation, can give no idea of the startling effect which the same sound creates on the Indian frontier. In the Lone Ranche it could not fail to cause alarm.

A hoof at that moment struck upon the stones outside—that of either a horse or mule. It could not be Lolita's : the mustang mare was securely

stalled at some distance off. And there were no other animals. Their late guests had taken the two saddle mules; the only others being the *mulas de cargo*, away with the peon Manuel.

‘It’s Manuel come back !’ exclaimed the doctor. ‘We ought to be rejoiced, instead of scared. Come, Don Valerian ! we shall have our cigaritto, yet.’

‘It’s not Manuel,’ said Miranda ; ‘the dogs would have known him before this. Hear how they keep on baying ! Ha ! what’s that ? Chico’s voice ! Somebody has hold of him !’

A cry from the peon outside, succeeded by expostulations, as if he was struggling in some strong grasp—his voice becoming commingled with the shrill screams of Conchita—were sounds almost simultaneous.

Don Valerian rushed towards his sword—the doctor laying hold of the first weapon that presented itself.

But weapons were of no avail, where there were not hands enough to wield them. In the rude log shieling there were doors front and

back; and through both poured a stream of men in uniform, armed with guns, pistols, and lances! Before Miranda could disengage his sword from the scabbard, a *cheraux-de-frise* of lance-points were within six inches of his breast; while the good doctor was similarly menaced!

Both saw that resistance would be idle. It could only end in their instant impalement.

‘*Surrender, rebels!*’ cried a voice rising above the din; ‘drop your weapons at once—if you wish your lives spared. Soldiers, disarm them! ’

Miranda recognised the voice. Perhaps, had he sooner heard it, he might have held on to his sword, and taken the chances of a desperate struggle.

It was too late! Just as the weapon was wrested from his grasp, he saw standing in the doorway the man whom of all others he had most reason to fear—Gil Uraga!





CHAPTER XII.

A NIGHT OF ANXIETY.

FRANK HAMERSLEY and Walt Wilder, concealed in the cedar scrub, awaited the morning light to give them a revelation. Not patiently, but with spirits chafing and agonised. They were equally interested in the story the sun should reveal. Both had their passion—each in his respective way—each a loved one in danger. Neither closed eye in sleep. With nerves terribly strung, and bosoms wildly agitated, they lay awake—counting the hours, and questioning the stars.

They conversed but little; and that only in whispers. The night was profoundly still. They could distinctly hear the voices of the troopers left on picket below. Hamersley, who understood their tongue, could even make sense of their con-

versation. It was ribald and blasphemous; boasts of their *bonnes fortunes* with the damsels of the Del Norte, and curses at the ill-starred expedition that was separating them from their sweethearts.

Later, a luminous halo stealing up to the summit of the mound showed that they had struck a light; and shortly after, the phrases, '*Soto en el puerto! Cavallo mozo!*' (The knave in the gate! The queen winner!) proclaimed them engaged in the never-ending national game of *monte*.

Until about midnight, Frank Hamersley and the hunter listened to the calls and curses of the gamblers. Then, other sounds reaching their ears absorbed all their attention. Up out of the valley, on the elastic air, came the loud baying of bloodhounds, carried by reverberation along the façade of the cliffs. Almost instantly after, a human voice, quick followed by another. The first was that of Chico, the second Conchita. All these sounds the listeners understood, and could conjecture their import.

‘They’re at the shanty now,’ muttered Walt;

‘the dogs hev give tongue, on hearin’ ‘em approach. That fust shout war from the Injun’ Cheeko ; an’ the t’other air hern—my gurl’s. Dur-nation ! if they hurt but a ha’r o’ her head—Wagh ! what’s the use o’ my talkin’ ?’

As if feeling his impotence, the hunter suddenly ceased speech ; again bending his ear to listen. Hamersley, without heeding him, was already doing this ; his whole soul absorbed in the act.

From the valley came a confusion of voices, though none of them loud. The stream, here and there falling in cataracts, of itself caused a Babel of sound. Only a shout or scream could have been heard above it. There was no shout but that caused by the peon ; no scream, after the cries of Conchita had ceased ; and, what more than all tranquillised the spirits of the listeners, no report of firearms. A shot, at that moment, heard by Hamersley, would have given him more uneasiness than would have done a gun or pistol aimed at himself.

‘Thank God !’ he gasped out, after a long while spent in listening ; ‘Miranda has made no

resistance. He saw it would be of no use, and has quietly surrendered. It must be all over now, and they are captives.'

‘Wal, better thet than they shed be corps,’ was the consolatory reflection of the hunter. ‘So long as thar’s breath left in thar bodies, we ken hev a hope, as I sayed arready. Let’s keep up our hearts, Frank, by thinkin’ o’ thet fix atween the wagguns, an’ the scrape in the cave. We’ve got clar o’ them in a way this chile ’ud call mirakelus; an’ we may yit git *them* clar in somethin’ o’ the same fashun. ’Slong’s we’ve got our claws over a kuttle o’ good rifles, we shed niver say *die*. Thet’s my readin’ o’ it.’

The hunter’s speech was encouraging; but for all that, it did not hinder him or his comrade from soon after falling into despondency.

This feeling held possession of both till the rising of the sun—till it had reached its meridian. When the day broke, with eyes keenly scrutinising, they looked down into the valley. A mist hung over the stream, sprung from the spray of its cascades. It lifted at length, and displayed

to them no more than they had been expecting. Around the ranche, horses standing picketed, and men moving about in uniform—a picture of military life in ‘country quarters.’ Their point of view was too far off to enable them to note individual forms, or the actions being carried on. These last were left to conjecture—a conjecture to both agonising.

They had to endure for long hours—up to that of noon. Then the notes of a bugle, rising clear above the hissing of the cascades, foretold a change in the spectacle. It was the call of ‘Boots and Saddles!’ The men were seen caparisoning their horses, and standing by the stirrup.

Another bugle-strain gave the order to ‘Mount!’ soon after, the ‘Forward!’ Then the lancer troop was seen filing off, disappearing under the trees, like some gigantic serpent. Some white drapery fluttered near its head; as if the reptile had seized upon some tender prey as a dove from its cot, and was bearing it off to its slimy lair.

For twenty minutes Walt and Hamersley waited with nervous impatience. It required this time

to make the ascent from the ranche to the upper plain. After entering among the trees, the soldiers and their captives were out of sight ; but the clattering of the horses' hoofs could be heard, as they struck upon the rock-strewn path that led upward through the ravine. Once or twice a trumpet sounded, telling of the progress of the troop.

At length its head came in sight ; and soon after, the leading files, following singly one after the other, as they ascended along the narrow ledge.

As the path became more open between the twin mounds, the formation changed into twos, though a single horseman still held the lead.

Presently he was near enough for his features to be distinguished ; and Hamersley's heart struck fiercely against his ribs as he recognised them. If there could have been any doubt before, it was settled now. He saw his antagonist in the duel —Gil Uraga. He was certain, now, that this was the man who had caused the destruction of his caravan. The horse bestridden by the robber

was proof. He was got up in splendid style; very different from the dust-stained cavalier who the day before had passed over the plain. Now he appeared in a gorgeous laced uniform, with lancer-cap and plume, gold cords and aiguillettes dangling over his breast. He had that morning made his toilet with care, in consideration of the company in which he intended to travel.

Neither Hamersley nor the ranger kept their eyes long upon him; they were both looking for other objects, each his own. These soon made their appearance, their white drapery distinguishable amid the darker uniforms. They were now near the centre of the troop, the young lady upon her own horse Lolita, and the Indian damsel on a mule. They were free, both hands and limbs; but two lancers close following had evidently the charge of keeping an eye upon them. Some files farther rearward was another group, more resembling captives. This was composed of three men upon mules, all fast bound to saddle and stirrup, two of them having, besides, their arms pinioned behind their backs. Their animals were led, each

by a trooper preceding it. The two, about whose security so much care had been taken, were Don Valerian and the doctor. The third, with his arms left free, was the peon Chico. His fellow servant Manuel, also on muleback, was following not far behind; but in his demeanour there was nothing of the prisoner. If he looked gloomy, it was from thinking of his black treason and ingratitude. Perhaps he may have by this time repented, or more likely the prospect was not so cheerful. After all, what would be his reward? He had ruined his master, and several others besides; but that would not win him the respect of Conchita.

Hamersley felt some little relieved as Don Valerian came in sight; still more as the march brought him nearer, and he could perceive no sign of his being wounded. The elaborate fastenings were of themselves evidence, that no injury had as yet befallen him. It was a struggle of resistance, ending in his being cut or shot down, they had most dreaded; and what they now knew of Uraga made it quite probable that he would

have sought a pretext for this. As Don Valerian was still alive, and being carried off his prisoner, the ruffian had perhaps some other purpose.

One by one, and two by two, the troop came filing on, till its leader was opposite to where Hamersley and Walt were concealed among the cedars. Well screened by the thickly-set branches, and the dark dense foliage that covered them, they could note every movement passing below. The distance was about two hundred yards in a down-slanting direction.

When the lancer Colonel came up to where the picket had been posted, he halted, and gave an order. It was for the guard to fall in with the rest of the troop.

At this moment a similar thought was in the minds of the two men watching him from the top of the mound. The hunter was the first to give speech to it. He did it in a whisper.

‘Ef I ked trust the carry o’ this rifle, or yourn eyther.’

‘I was thinking of it,’ was the reply, also in a whisper. ‘I’m afraid it’s too far, Walt.’

‘Ef we ked pick *him* off, it ‘ud simplerfy matters consid’rable. ‘T all events, it ‘ud git your gurl out o’ danger, an’ in course, both on ‘em. I b’lieve the hul on ‘em ‘ud run at hearin’ a shot. Then we ked gie ‘em a second, and load an’ fire half-a-dozen times afore they ked mount up hyar —ef they’d dar to try it. I reck’n it’s too fur. The distance in these hyar high purairias is desprit deceivin’. Durned pity we kedn’t make sure.’

‘We couldn’t. We might miss, and then—’

‘Things ‘ud only be wuss. I reckin we’d better let ‘em slide now, and follow arter. Thar boun’ straight for the Del Nort; but whether or no, we kin eezy pick up thar track.’

Hamersley still hesitated, his fingers nervously tightening on his gun, and then relaxing. His thoughts were flowing in a quick current—too quick for cool deliberation. He knew he could trust his own aim, as well as that of his comrade; but the distance was doubtful, and both might miss. Then it would be certain death to them: for the place was such that there would be no chance to escape, with fifty lancers riding after

them, themselves mounted upon two poor mules. These could not now be reached without difficulty and danger. Even if they could defend themselves on the mound, it could not be for long. Two against fifty, they must in time be overpowered. He could not altogether agree with what Walt had said—that the troopers would take to flight after the second shot. Not likely, even if their leader should fall to the first.

Besides, Uraga was carrying his prisoners to New Mexico—to Albuquerque, of course. He and his comrade were Americans, and not proscribed there. They could follow, and watch the development of events. Some better opportunity might arise for a rescue. A Mexican prison might offer this; and, from all he knew, would.

Only one thought hindered him from giving way to this reasoning: the thought of Adela travelling in such company—under such an escort—worse than unprotected!

Once more he scanned the distance that separated him from Uraga, his gun tightly grasped.

Had the lancer colonel suspected his proximity

at that moment, and what was passing in his mind, he would have sat less pompously in his saddle. Patience, backed by prudence, asserted its claim, and Hamersley's grasp upon his gun was again relaxed.

The lancer troop, filing up the gap, formed into a more compact order of march; and then struck off over the plain, in the direction whence they had come.





CHAPTER XIII.

A STRAGGLER PICKED UP.

HAMERSLEY and the Texan remained in their place of concealment on the top of the mound. To have descended to the plain would have been to discover themselves to the eye of any lancer who might be looking back. Even to go down to their animals would risk this, for the ravine where they had left them opened westwardly.

It was a rigorous necessity for them to stay where they were, until the troop had got many miles off; for in that pure atmosphere a horseman, magnified by the mirage, might be sighted at great distance. Though it was Mexican mules they would be mounted on, the Texan's tall figure would make up for the deficit in the dimensions of his animal.

There was no help for it but keep their place

till the proper time for leaving it. It would not make much difference ; as, after starting along the trail, they would have to preserve distance.

As the troop had gone off in the ordinary measured walk, and was still continuing this pace, the patience of both would be tried for at least two hours. Now no longer in dread of being observed, Walt took out his pipe, while Hamersley lit a cigar—one of those with which his late host had provided him, without telling him they were the last. The spirits of both were depressed to the deepest gloom. The nicotine might to some extent relieve them.

They had not been smoking more than a minute, when a sound reaching their ears caused both of them to start. It came from below ; and at first they thought it might be one of their own mules kicking against the rocks—for it resembled this. But on listening, they heard it again, and could tell that it did not come from that side. Still was it like a hoof-stroke, either of horse or mule. It evidently ascended out of the gap from which the lancers had late parted.

Once more crawling back to their point of observation, and craning their necks outward, they looked below. There they saw what no little surprised them—a man leading a mule out from behind a huge boulder of rock that lay in the gap, stretching quarter-ways across it.

At a glance they recognised the peon Manuel—the traitor. He appeared to be proceeding by stealth; casting apprehensive looks in the direction in which the troopers had ridden off, as if to assure himself that they were all gone. It was evident he had caché'd himself and his mule behind the boulder, with the intention of staying till the soldiers were out of sight.

But what could be his motive, purpose, or object? This was the puzzle to those who now looked down upon him.

They did not dwell on it scarce for an instant. It was at once apparent that their object could be best served by getting their hands upon the traitor—not to kill him, but to make him confess.

The difficulty was, how to do this without being discovered to the departing troop—still less

than a mile off. It was just possible they could scramble down that side of the mound that faced toward the gap ? It was steep, but not precipitous. Going that way, they would not be seen by the soldiers ; but they would by the man himself, long before they could reach him ; and as he had now mounted his mule, he could easily gallop off, and rejoin the troop. This would be their undoing.

While they were considering which was the best course to pursue, a movement on the part of the peon relieved them from all uncertainty. Instead of heading his mule toward the upper plain, he turned it in the opposite direction, and commenced moving down into the valley.

They saw this with surprise, for they could not guess what he was intending to do. No matter ; there was a chance now of laying hold of him, and making him declare it.

As soon as he had turned the angle of the cliff, that concealed the downward path from their sight, they commenced the descent of the slope. They did not think of going to get their mules,

for that route was still interdicted. In the chase they were now entering upon, they would have no need of them—better, indeed, without; since the path into the valley could be traversed quicker a-foot than on muleback.

They reached the bottom of the ravine, and there paused before continuing their pursuit. They only stopped to consider what would be the best way to make sure of their man. They did not wish to shoot him. That would defeat their purpose—besides risking their own safety. Borne upward on the tranquil air, the crack of a rifle might yet reach the ears of the receding soldiers.

‘I’ll tell ye how,’ said the ex-ranger, to whom this sort of thing was a professional speciality. ‘You stay hyar, Frank, an’ let me foller him down. He’s a-goin’ back to the shanty for some purpiss; an’ I reck’n we’ve got him in the trap. Jess squat ahint that ar rock, an’ see’s he don’t pass ye out’ard. I’ll grup him afore he kin git out by the other eend—ef he mean that, which for sartin he don’t. The ranche air what he’s arter, and I’ll git him thar, if not sooner. Keep yur

ears open, and when ye hear me give a wheep o' a whissel, ye kin foller down.'

Hamersley saw the rationality of this plan, and at once signified his approval of it by placing himself behind the rock—the same boulder where the peon had made hiding-place.

Without another word Walt started down the ravine, and was soon lost to his comrade's sight, disappearing round a projecting angle of the cliff.

The young Kentuckian was not kept waiting a very great while; only about twenty minutes. Then the promised 'wheep' came up from the valley, loud enough to be distinguished above the sough of the cascades, but not to be heard far off upon the plain. From the direction, he could tell it was sent from the ranche, or somewhere near it; and without losing a moment, he hastened down towards it.

On reaching the dwelling, he found Manuel, as he had expected, in the clutches of the Texan—not exactly in his grasp, but lying upon the ground beside him, with a rope round his ankles, and another binding his wrists.

'I ked a caught the skunk a leetle sooner,' Walt said; 'but I war kewrious to find out what he war arter. Hyar's the explication o' it.'

He pointed to a large bag lying near, with the contents half poured out of it—a rich array of articles of *bijouterie* and *vertu*, resembling a cornucopiae spilling its fruits and flowers. Hamersley recognised some of the articles as part of the *penates* of his late host.

'Stolen plunder,' said Walt; 'that's what it air; and stole from a master as he's betrayed, maybe to death, and a mistress that's been too kind to him. Durnation! thar's a tortiss-shell comb as belonged to my Concheeter, an' a pair o' slippers I kin swar wur hern. What shell we do wi' him?'

'What we intended,' said Hamersley, assuming a serious air—'make him confess; and when we have got his story out of him, we shall think about what next.'

The confession was not very difficult to extract. With Walt Wilder's bowie-knife gleaming before his eyes, its blade held within six inches of

his ribs, the wretch revealed all that had passed since the moment of his first meditating treason. He even made declaration of the motive; knowing the nobility of the man who threatened him, and thinking by this means to obtain pardon.

To strengthen his chances, he went still farther, turning traitor against him to whom he had lately sold himself—Uranga. He had overheard a conversation between the Mexican colonel and his *ayudante*, Lieutenant Roblez. It was to the effect, that they did not intend to take colonel Miranda all the way back to Albuquerque. How they meant to dispose of him he did not know. He had only half overheard the conversation. About the señorita he had heard them say something too, but did not clearly comprehend it.

Hamersley could only supply the blank with dire imaginings.





CHAPTER XIV.

OLD ACQUAINTANCES.

WHILE they were deliberating what to do with their prisoner, and a good deal puzzled about it, a sound reached their ears—first those of Walt Wilder, and then of his comrade—that caused both to start and turn pale.

There could be no mistaking it for aught else than the trampling of horses—of many horses; and they could have no other thought than that the lancer troop had returned into the valley, and was approaching the place where they stood.

Instinctively they retreated inside the house, without taking their prisoner with them. He was so tied, he could not stir from the spot; and if he did, what difference would it make?

Their thought was a defensive fight; and the

hut, with its stout timber walls, was the best place they could think of for maintaining it. It had two doors, one front and one back ; both of heavy slab-split stems of the palmilla. They were made strong and to shut close : for grizzly bears sometimes strayed round the ranche. The doors were quickly slammed to, and barred ; and then the two men took their stand, each by a window—these being but apertures in the log wall, and of small dimensions.

With ears keenly bent, and communicating with each other what they heard, the two stood to await the expected appearance of the enemy. It was strange too : the hoof-strokes heard did not seem to come down the valley, but in the opposite direction! Still, this might be a deception of sound, caused by the sough of the cascades or the echo of the cliffs.

The question would soon be solved ; and, with beating hearts and bated breath, they awaited the solution.

Presently other sounds became mingled with those already reaching them—the voices of men.

This was to be expected ; but again they believed, or fancied, that it was *up* the valley, and not down it, the horses and men seemed coming.

As they listened, laughter became commingled with the voices, hitherto heard only in conversation—laughter in loud peals, like the neighing of horses. It was altogether unlike what might or would have issued from Mexican throats ; while, at the same time, it was not the cachinnation of the Indian.

While they were cudgelling their brains to arrive at an elucidation of the mystery, a tableau was displayed before their wondering gaze, that saved them all farther trouble.

In front of the ranche was a tract of open ground, of about three or four acres in extent ; in the centre of which was the lakelet or ‘tarn,’ already spoken of, while at its lower end the stream swept outward among trees. From under the shadow of these came out a long string of horsemen, riding one after the other, in Indian file, until between forty and fifty had deployed on the open plain.

There they halted, within short gun-shot of the dwelling ; and appeared to gaze upon it with surprise—almost wonder. Only for a moment, while a word or two passed between them ; after which they came riding on towards it.

Through their loophole-like windows, Wilder and Hamersley had a clear view of them as they approached. There was not the slightest possibility of mistaking them for the troop, whose return they had been dreading. No two bodies of mounted men could have presented a *coup d'œil* more dissimilar. Instead of the little minikin Mexicans, mounted on their gingerly mustangs, the horsemen now approaching—as well as their steeds—were gigantic by contrast ; while their dress, arms, and accoutrements, horse-gear and everything else, were as unlike those of Uraga's lancers as a bear to a bluebottle.

Whatever effect their appearance may have had upon Hamersley, it was to the eye of Walt Wilder a tableau familiar ; and so pleasing, that at the first sight of it, when fairly displayed on the open ground, he sprang to the door, kicked out

the bar, and drew the slabs back, half detaching them from their leatheren hinges.

In another instant he was outside, Hamersley following him.

‘Dog-gone my cats!’ was the exclamatory phrase that escaped from his lips, as he cleared the threshold of the cabin. ‘Hell an’ scissors! what’s this? Is Walt Wilder a-dreamin’? Why, Frank, look thar. Thar’s Ned Haynes, o’ the Texas Rangers, my ole capten; an’ thar’s Nat Cully; an’, durn it, thar’s the hul kumpany!’

‘Walt Wilder!’ cried a score of voices; while the men who gave utterance to them seemed for the moment to stand aghast—as if a spectre had appeared to them. Then riding rapidly up, they surrounded him.

‘What does this mean, Walt?’ asked the captain of the Rangers.

‘That’s jess what I want ter know. What air ye doin’ away hyar? What’s fetched ye, boys?’

‘Why you—we came to bury you!’

‘Bury *me*?’

‘Yis, hoss,’ said Cully, slipping from his

saddle, and giving his old comrade a prairie embrace; 'for that purpiss we kim express. An' as I knowed ye hed a kindly feelin' torst yur ole shootin' iron, I've brought it along, intendin' to lay it in the grave aside ye.'

As Cully spoke, he handed a gun to Walt; who at once recognised the rifle he had been compelled to abandon when pursued by the Indians.

'This don't make things much clarer,' said he. 'Come, fellurs, explain yurselves. I see it's my ole gun; but how did yer git purseshun o' her? That's what perplexes this chile. Talk plain, Cully. Tell us what's all about.'

'Wal,' said Cully, 'I reck'n it's you as oughter tell us that. Our story air, that we kim across a party o' Tenawa Kimanches, unner a chief they called "Horned Lizart." He hain't no name now, as he's wiped out, 'long wi' the majority o' his band. *We* did that down on Pee-cawn Crik. On his purson, arter he war throwed in his tracks, we foun' this rifle, which I know'd to be yourn. Sartint we thought somethin' hed happened to yer; but we kedn't tell, hevin' no sign or float-

stick to gie us a hint o' yur wharabouts. Chanced we hed captered a Mexikin renegade—that 'possum ye see out thar. He war jined in Horned Lizart's lot, an' hed been 'long wi' 'em some time. So wi' fit a loose larzette roun' his thrapple, an' on the promise o' its gittin' tighter, he tolts us the hul story—how they hed attackted an' skuttled a carryvan, an' all 'bout entoomin' you an' a kimrade, who war wi' ye. Our bizness out hyar war to look up yur bones, an' gie 'em a more Christ-yun kind o' beril. We war on the way, the rennygade guidin' us. He said he ked take us a near cut up the gully, through which we've jess come,—the which, I take it, air one o' the heads o' the Brazo. Near cut! dog-gone it, he's been righter than I reck'n he thort o'. 'Stead o' yur bones, thar's yur body, lookin' 's big as ever. Now, Walt, we want *yur* side o' the story, the which appears to be a darned deal more o' a unexplainable mistry than ourn. So open yur head, ole hoss, and let's hear it.'

Brief and graphic as was Cully's narrative, it took Walt Wilder still less time to put his former

associates in possession of what had happened to himself, and the young man, he now introduced to them as having been his companion in the closed cave.

But it was not the occasion to dwell upon the details, either of that tragedy, or the incidents succeeding it. They were chapters of the past ; and there was one in the future, yet unfinished, that demanded immediate attention.





CHAPTER XV.

FARTHER CROSS-QUESTIONING.

THE arrival of the Rangers at that moment was certainly a contingency of the strangest kind. Ten minutes later, and they would have found the ranche deserted ; for Hamersley and Wilder had made up their mind to start, taking the traitor along with them. The Texans would have discovered signs to tell of recent occupation by a large body of men ; and from the tracks of shod-horses, these skilled trailers would have known they had not been Indians. Still they would have made some delay around the house, and encamped in the valley for the night. This they declared to have been their intention, for their horses were jaded by the expedition having been extended beyond its original purpose. They them-

selves had suffered severe fatigue in making their way up the cañon, which led out to the lower plain, a distance of nearly twenty miles, of the most difficult travelling.

In going out above, next morning, they would have discovered the trail of the Mexican soldiers ; but, although these were their sworn enemies, they might not have been tempted to follow them. The start of nearly twenty-four hours, their own animals in but poor condition, the likelihood of a large body of the lancers being near,—these conditions might have weighed with them ; and they would have continued on to the spot to which the renegade was guiding them—a course leading northward, and altogether different. A singular coincidence, then, their coming up at that exact moment. It seemed the hand of Providence opportunely extended ; and this Hamersley regarded it, as did also the ex-ranger.

Briefly as might be, they made known to the new-comers the circumstances in which they were placed ; and by the Rangers their cause was at once espoused—unanimously, without one dissenting

voice. The voices in its favour were uttered with an energy and warmth that gave Hamersley a world of hope. Here were friends, whose enemies were their own. And there was sufficient of them to pursue Uraga's troop and destroy it. They might overtake it before night ; or, if not, on the morrow. If not then, they would pursue it to the confines of New Mexico ; to the banks of the Del Nort itself.

Hamersley's heart was no more depressed. A plan for rescuing his friend Don Valerian from death, and saving Adela, his own sweetheart, from dishonour, was no longer a thing unfeasible—no more an apparent impossibility. There was now more than a probability—almost a certainty, of its success.

To the Texans the proposal came like an invitation to a ball, or a frontier *fandango*. Excitement was the very breath of their life ; and a fight with the Mexican foemen their joy ; a pursuit of them, in any case, their supremest delight. Pursuit such as this, however, having for its object, not only the defeat of a hated enemy—far

more hated than the Indian, because far more despised, on account of his poltroonery—but the recovery of captives, beautiful female captives, as their old comrade Walt enthusiastically described them—this was the very thing to rouse them to vigorous resolve, and stir up in their hearts the spirit of border romance—that spirit that had made them *Rangers*.

Notwithstanding their newly-kindled enthusiasm, the Rangers did not act rashly. Haynes, their captain, was an old 'Indian fighter,' and one of the most experienced leaders of that Texan border warfare, so long continued.

Despite Hamersley's natural wish to start at once on the pursuit, the Ranger captain counselled prudence; and Walt, of less fiery impatience than his comrade, also inclined to this course.

'But why should we lose a moment?' inquired the hot-blooded Kentuckian; 'they cannot yet be more than five miles off. We may overtake them before the going down of the sun.'

'That's just what we oughtn't to do,' rejoined the Ranger chief. 'Suppose they get sight of us

before we are near ? On the naked plain you speak of, they'd be sure to do that. What then ? Their horses, I take it, are fresh, compared with ours. They might gallop off, and leave us looking after them, like so many fools. They'd have time, too, to take their prisoners along with them.'

This last speech settled the question with Hammersley ; and he no longer offered opposition.

'Let the sun go down,' said the Texan captain ; 'that's just what we want. Since they're bound due west, I reckon we can easily keep on their trail, clear night or dark one. Here's Nat Cully can do that ; and if our friend Walt hasn't been spoiled by his late visit to the settlements, I take it he can be trusted to do the same.'

The ranger and ex-ranger, both listening, remained modestly silent.

'Our plan will be,' continued the captain, 'to surround them in the night, and so make sure of them. They'll have a camp ; and these Mexican soldiers will be sure to keep fires burning late, if it's only to give them light for their card-playing. That'll guide us to their squatting-ground.'

The Captain's scheme seemed so sensible, that no one opposed it; and in words Hamersley signified assent.

It was resolved to remain another hour in the valley, and then start for the upper plain. An hour would give the Texans time to recruit their horses on the sweet *gramma* grass, and themselves on the game they had killed before entering the cañon. This hung plentifully over the croups of their saddles, in the shape of wild turkeys, venison, buffalo and bear meat.

The fires in the ranche, and those that had been kindled by the soldiers, yet smouldering, were replenished, and the abandoned cooking utensils once more called into use. But pointed saplings, and the iron ramrods of their jäger rifles—the ranger's ordinary spit—were in more demand, and broiling became the order of the day.

Now, with more time, and a better opportunity to compare notes with their new associates, Hamersley and the hunter-guide discovered some facts relating to their own disaster, hitherto unknown or obscure to them. The most important

of these was one less surprising to themselves than to the Texans. It was the *éclaircissement* of that matter to which their thoughts had been already directed ; as well from their own experience and observations, as from the suggestions thrown out by their late host. This was, the connection of Uraga with the attack upon their caravan. They did not require any farther confirmation of it. The possession of Hamersley's horse by the lancer colonel was evidence circumstantial enough. But there was now a chance of having it direct from the lips of the Mexican renegade, who should know all about the affair.

He was once more put into the witness-stand ; the lariat round his neck, its loose end over the limb of a tree. He at first lied point-blank ; then equivocated ; and at length—reflecting that it would in time be found out, and his life forfeited for not telling the truth—he made a clean breast of it ; keeping back only the fact of his own agency as a go-between of the two scoundrels, the white savage and the red.



CHAPTER XVI.

A 'NORTE.'

WHEN the Rangers heard the tale of atrocity in all its completeness, their rage, already sufficiently excited, became almost ungovernable ; and it was as much as their leader could do to restrain them from at once starting on the pursuit. Some of them even dropped their roast ribs half eaten, demanding to be led on.

The counsels of the more prudent prevailed ; but it was not long after till most, if not all of them, believed this prudence misplaced. Grievously Hamersley did so, and he had reason.

It arose from a circumstance entirely unexpected. While they were still in the midst of their meal, the sky, that had been all the morning of cerulean brightness, became suddenly clouded.

Not clouded as this term is understood in the ordinary sense; but absolutely black, as if the sun had been extinguished, or had dropped down from the heavens. The change somewhat resembled a total eclipse; though still darker, and the darkness had come on more rapidly. It could not have been more than five minutes from its commencement, before the obscurity had reached completeness.

Though troubled, chagrined, by the appearance, there were few who beheld it with surprise. None of the old prairie men were in any way astonished, for they knew what it meant. At the first portentous sign, Cully sprang to his feet, crying out,

‘A tornado—a *norther*!’

Walt Wilder had observed it at the same time, and confirmed the prognostic of his old Ranger *confrère*. This was before any of the others had noticed anything strange in the aspect of the sky, and when there was just the suspicion of a shadow over the sun’s disk. All Texans understand the significance of the word ‘norther’—a storm or

tornado, usually preceded by a hot stifling atmosphere, with drifting dust-clouds, accompanied by sheet or forked lightning, and roars of terrific thunder, followed by wind and rain, sometimes hail or sleet, as if the sluices of heaven were set open; ending in a blast of more regular direction, but chill as though direct from the Pole.

In less than ten minutes after first seeing its sign, the storm was upon them. Down into the valley poured the dust, swept from the surface of the upper plain—along with it the leaves and stalks of the artemisia and other weeds of the desert. Soon after followed wind, at first in low sighs, like the sound of a distant sea; then roaring against the rocks, and swooping down among the trees, whose branches went crashing before its blast. Then the lightning, the thunder, and the rain—the last falling, not in drops, but in sheets, as if projected from a spout.

For shelter the Rangers rushed inside the ranche, leaving their horses to take care of themselves. The latter stood cowering under the trees, neighing with affright—the mules among them

giving vent to their plaintive hinney. There were dogs too, that howled and barked; and other sounds that came from farther off, from the wild denizens of the forest—the screams of the cougar, the coyote, and the eagle—the snortings of alarmed bears, and the hooting of scared owls. Crowded within the hut, so thickly as to have only standing room, the men waited for the calming down of the storm. They could do so with the more patience, knowing it would not long continue. It was not their first experience of a norther.

The only thought that troubled them was the delay—their being hindered from starting on the pursuit. True, the party to be pursued would suffer from a like interruption. They would have to come to a stop during the storm, and the interval of distance would remain the same.

But then the tracks would be obliterated—every vestige of them. The wind, the rain, the dust, would do this. If out of sight—as by this time they would be—how was their trail to be followed?

They were going due west, or nearly so.

Nearly! The deflection of a single point upon the prairies—above all, upon the Staked Plain—would leave the traveller like a ship at sea without compass—to steer by guess-work, or go by chance.

The only consoling reflection was, that the Mexican lancers would make halt, and stay till the storm was over. They had some light baggage—a tent or two, with other camp-equipage. This was learnt from the peon, twice turned traitor; and Hamersley, as also Walt Wilder, had themselves made note of it.

As on the part of the soldiers there appeared no great reason for haste, they would not be likely to resume their march till the sky was quite clear. They might gain nothing in distance. And as after the storm their tracks would be more distinct—by reason of the rain and the *tabula rasa* on which the hoof-marks must be imprinted—all that would be needed would be for the pursuers to deploy, and strike the trail farther on. Time might be lost, in all probability; but it was a hundred miles to the nearest New Mexican settle-

ment, and they could still hope to overhaul Uraga long before his reaching it. He would have to get into the heart of New Mexico, ere he could count on the secure keeping of his prisoners. This at least was the reflection of those who contemplated pursuing him.

Satisfied by these assurances, spoken by the sager ones of their party, the Rangers remained inside the hut—upon the roof of which the rain was still pouring down—without experiencing any very keen pangs of impatience. Some of them even jested; their jokes having allusion to the close proximity in which they were packed; the steam from their coats caused by the first dash of the rain-storm; and other like trifles incidental to the situation.

Walt Wilder himself did not show any very terrible discontent. Whatever might be the danger of Don Valerian and the others, his Conchita was not quite so much exposed. The little brown-skinned damsel was not in the proscribed list; and the ex-ranger, strong in the belief that he had her heart, as he had the promise of her hand, was

less apprehensive of consequences. Besides, he was now in the midst of his old comrades, and the exchange of histories and reminiscences was sufficient to fill up the time, and keep him from indulging in any impatient longings.

Hamersley alone was really unhappy. Despite all the assurances spoken and the hopes felt, there was yet much uncertainty—enough to keep apprehension on the strain. His uneasiness, however, was still endurable; and only passed this point when a thought came into his mind—a memory that flashed across his brain, as if a bullet had struck him between the temples.

It was a mental shock that caused him to start, at the same time uttering a strange cry.

‘What is it, Mr. Hamersley?’ asked the ranger captain, who was standing close by his side.

‘My God!’ exclaimed the young Kentuckian, ‘I had forgotten. We must start at once, or we shall be too late—too late!’

The lightning still flashed, the thunder rolled, the wind bellowed, and the rain swept down as sluice-like as ever.

The men wondered. Some of them thought the prairie merchant had gone mad.

What could he mean? Haynes and several others, speaking at the same time, demanded an explanation. It was instantly given, and in as brief form as possible.

The path leading up to the plain for a portion of the way traversed the channel of the stream. When this became swollen—as at long intervals it did, by a rain-pour such as that now detaining them—there was no egress from the valley. The stream became a turbulent torrent, remaining so till the waters went down. Neither horse nor man could stem it; and the cliffs, closing chine-like on each side, left no possible path. It was the same with the cañon below, up which the Rangers had themselves come. Any one caught in the valley during a storm must remain there till the flood subsided.

Hamersley had been told all this by his late host; but up to that instant he had not thought of the circumstance. The exciting scene that preceded had caused him to forget it.

‘An’ me too, I forgot it,’ came a voice from among the crowd, and from a head overtopping them all, recognisable as that of Walt Wilder. ‘Durnation ! it’s all true ; the ole doc tolts this chile the same. Boys, we’ve got to put out from hyar right smart, ef we mean to reech the upper story o’ the Stake Plain inside o’ forty-eight hours. Rain or shine, storm or no storm, it’s got to be did, and hyar’s one as starts for the doin’ o’ it.’

As the giant spoke, he commenced elbowing his way through the crowd, making for the door, where Hamersley had already preceded him.

The example was electric, though it needed not that. Every man of them had now a clear comprehension of what was meant ; and, despite the pelting rain, they rushed out into the open ground, and ran towards their horses.

Fortunately there were two or three supernumerary steeds, which the Texans had picked up on the outside plains and brought with them. This gave the opportunity for all to be mounted—not omitting either the renegade or the traitor.

Quick as at the command of a cavalry bugle-call, all were mounted and going at full gallop up the valley path—regardless of the rain, regardless of the blast blowing in their teeth. Knowing the way, and guiding it, Hamersley and the hunter rode at the head; the captain of the Rangers and Cully close after; the rest stringing out behind.

The place was reached where the stream, coming from between the twin cliffs, became spread into a broader channel, taking a more tranquil course through the valley. There was no tranquillity there. Through the cleft of dark red sandstone a torrent was roaring, its surface white with foam. The strongest horse could not have stemmed it. A hippopotamus would have been swept down like one of its froth-flakes. As easily might a salmon have ascended the cataract of Niagara.

Hamersley saw this at a glance. His heart sank within his bosom, and he almost fell prostrate to the earth, as he dropped despairingly from his saddle.

His anguished cry, 'Too late!' repeated in louder tones by Walt Wilder, and taken up by the Texans close pressing behind, was scarce heard amid the hissing of the stream that surged mockingly by.





CHAPTER XVII.

A RUSH FOR SHELTER.

WHEN fairly out of the gap, Uraga, directing his *alferez* to take charge of the troop, rode at some distance ahead, Roblez alongside of him. It was with the object of holding conversation without being overheard by their followers.

‘What do you think of the Señorita Miranda?’ was the lancer colonel’s first question, as soon as they were out of earshot.

Roblez had not seen Miranda’s sister before their rude intrusion of the preceding night.

‘*Carrambo*, colonel; what could one think? She’s certainly the most beautiful captive I ever saw.’

‘Not captive; I wish she were. I might make better terms with her. However, when the bro-

ther is once out of the way, and that old plotter Prospero, she may be easier to deal with.'

'And you have determined upon getting rid of them?'

'That's a silly question to ask, for a man who knows me as you, Roblez. Of course I have determined; and I think you will answer for it, that I generally carry out my determinations.'

'Miranda seems not a bad sort of fellow; he had the name of being an accomplished soldier.'

'You are growing wonderfully merciful, *camarado*. Is it the tender glances of the señorita that have softened you?'

'Not likely,' said the lieutenant, laughing; 'the eyes that could pierce the heart of Gaspardo Roblez are not to be found in the head of woman. If I have any weakness in the feminine way, it's for the goddess Fortune; and so long as I can get a pack of playing cards, with some rich gringo to join me in the game, I shall leave petticoats alone.'

Uraga laughed in his turn; for he knew the idiosyncrasy of his old comrade in crime—a strange one for a man who had often committed rob-

bery, and more than once stained his soul with murder. Cards, dice, and drink were his *penchant*, or rather passion. Of love he was incapable, and yet not given to lust. In his life's history there had been a chapter of love, and Uraga knew it. It had reached an unfortunate termination—having a good deal to do with his after evil life. And it had steeled his heart against the sex to something more than contempt, almost to an undying hatred. Like Byron's Corsair, Gaspardo Roblez had but one virtue left—courage—which always begets admiration for it in others. It was this that was leading him to put in a word for Don Valerian Miranda, whose bravery he knew of; as it was well known in the Mexican army.

‘He will be tried by the State, and perhaps executed, anyhow,’ he said, in continuation of his pleading.

‘Not the slightest hope of it,’ answered Uraga. ‘That might have been done when we first turned the party out. Too much time has passed for extreme measures now. Besides, things at the capital are a little bit shaky; and our worthy

chief, El Cojo, would scarce dare to sign a sentence of death—not for a man like Miranda.'

'At all events, he would be put in prison, and kept there.'

'Bal! what are our prisons? Not one of them that hasn't got a door with a golden key. And any day they may be set open by a *pronunciamiento*. In a jail—especially a New Mexican one—there's no security for the safe-keeping of Valerian Miranda.'

'He must die?'

'Gaspardo Roblez, turn your head round, and look in my face.'

'Well, colonel?'

'You see that scar on my cheek?'

'Certainly; it is conspicuous enough.'

'He did not give it; but he was the cause of my receiving it, twelve months ago. Ever since, it has been the curse and constant agony of my life. I feel it as though it were a fire eternally burning on my face. It can only be extinguished by the blood of those who kindled it. One of the two has escaped me by a miracle—a mystery.'

But there is hope yet. The peon says for certain, that he has gone on to the Del Norte ; and if there's a spot in all New Mexico where he can hide himself from my pursuing vengeance, I don't know it. As for Miranda, I am now pretty sure of him ; and I fancy, that after seeing this ugly gash on my face and the glance of my eyes above it, you will not repeat your question—Must he die ?

‘ But how is it to be done without *scandal* ? You know, colonel, it will not answer to murder the man outright. If not held to account by court-martial, it will at least get you into disgrace—myself as well. Had he shown fight, and given us a pretext, it would have been different.’

‘ My dear Gaspardo, don't trouble yourself about pretexts, or plans. I have one that will serve all purposes—my own in particular. There will be no scandal, not a whisper or suspicion of it.—What is it, *cabo* ?’

This last to a corporal, who, detached from the troop, had ridden up and saluted him.

‘ The alferez sends me to report, colonel, that

the Indian peon has, somehow or other, slipped away from us.'

'What! the man Manuel?'

'The same, colonel.'

'Halt!' commanded Uraga, calling to the troop, which instantly came to a stand. 'What's this I hear, alferez?' he said, riding back, and speaking to the sous-lieutenant.

'Colonel, we miss the fellow who guided us. He must have dropped behind as we rode up out of the valley.'

'It don't much signify,' said Uraga in an undertone to his adjutant Roblez; 'we've got all out of him we need care for. Still, it can be no harm to have him along. No doubt he's stolen off to settle some affair of his own—some pilferings, I presume; and will be found at the ranche. *Cabo!* take a file of men, go back into the valley, find this loiterer, and bring him with you. As I intend marching slowly to-day, you'll easily overtake us at our night camp.'

The corporal, singling out the file as directed, rode off; while the troop continued its interrupted

march, the colonel and his adjutant again riding far in advance, the former making some farther disclosure of his plans to his *particeps criminis*. They were atrocious.

Their *tête-à-tête* dialogue had continued for about an hour, when another lancer, riding up, again interrupted them. He was a grizzled old veteran, who had once been a *cibolero*, and had therefore seen life upon the plains.

‘What is it, Hernandez?’ demanded the colonel.

‘*Señor coronel*,’ said the man, pointing to a little speck in the sky, that had just shown itself above the north-eastern horizon, ‘do you see that?’

‘That spot of cloud? Yes. What of it?’

‘There’ll come trouble from it. It don’t look much now, but in ten minutes it’ll be over us. It’s the *norté*.’

‘You think so, Hernandez?’

‘I’m sure of it, colonel. *Carrambo!* I’ve seen it too often. You may trust me, señores; we’re going to have a storm.’

'In that case we had better come to a halt, and do what can be done for shelter. I see nothing that would screen a cat, but that little clump of dwarf oaks. Well, better it than nothing. It'll keep the full blast off us; and, as I suppose we shall now have to make halt for the night, we'll get wood from it for our fires. Ride back to the troop, Hernandez. Tell the alferez to bring the men up to yonder grove, and quickly. Have the tents ready to be pitched. *Vaya!*'

The ci-devant cibolero did as directed, going at a gallop; while the colonel and his adjutant trotted on to the clump of black-jacks, that was only three or four hundred yards out of their line of march. It was the same grove that had given shade and concealment to Frank Hamersley and Walt Wilder on the preceding day.

Uraga and Roblez saw the tracks of their mules, and exchanged some words regarding these; but the fast-darkening sky drove the subject out of their thoughts, and they occupied themselves in choosing a spot for the pitching of their tents.

Of these there were two: one that the colonel

had brought with him from Albuquerque; the other, found in the Lone Ranche—an old marquee that the refugees had taken with them in their flight. This had been brought along for the accommodation of the female captives; one of whom Uraga had reasons for treating, if not tenderly, at least with the show of tenderness.

They were soon set in the shelter of the mesquite grove, and occupied as ordered by Uraga; while the lancers, hastily dismounting, picketed their horses, and made other preparations for the storm, that had been predicted by their comrade Hernandez as something terrible.

Before long they saw his prediction verified, to the spirit and the letter.





CHAPTER XVIII.

THE SPLIT TRAIL.

IT would be impossible to depict the chagrin of the Rangers when they found themselves stayed in the pursuit—perhaps thwarted in a vengeance, which every man of them keenly felt, after hearing the confession of the renegade.

They saw that they were in a trap, helpless to get out of it. Walt Wilder, who, during his sojourn in the valley, and in his excursions with the botanist, had explored every corner of it, told them so ; and the traitor Manuel confirmed it. At one or two places there was a possibility for a man to scale the cliff ; but he must be a nimble climber. And if all of them had been this, what good ? They could not carry up their horses ; and if not, what chance for them to overtake a troop

of lancers, well mounted, and marching in haste ? For it was not likely these would make much delay in the desert.

How long before the flood would go down, and the channel become shallow enough to be passable ? This was the question that came next. Hamersley's memory did not serve him to answer it ; and Walt could only guess. Again the traitorous peon—not the renegade—was put upon the rack.

' Always twenty-four hours, never less ; sometimes, when the storm was a severe one, and much rain fell, two days.'

Much rain *had* fallen ; it was still pouring down. They might count upon the two days. And during this period of imprisonment, the pursued party would be upon the march—would get at least threescore miles ahead—in short, would reach the settlements before they could be overtaken.

The Rangers were furious—mad. Hamersley and the hunter were something more, or worse. Theirs was a madness mingled with the keenest and bitterest sorrow.

It was an unlucky moment for the corporal of lancers, and the two men sent back by Uraga, to fall into their hands—which they did. Having reached the valley-bottom just as the storm commenced, these had taken shelter under the trees, where the Rangers, in their hurried ride through the rain, had not perceived them. But they had seen the ruck of Rangers as they galloped past ; and surprised, as well as alarmed, by an apparition strange anywhere, but far more in such a place, the three lancers had taken the precaution still farther to conceal themselves, by going farther in among the trunks of the trees.

It did not avail them. The disappointed pursuers, on finding their route interrupted by the swollen stream, saw no reason for remaining there ; and, leaving one or two of their number to watch the flood, and report the first appearance of its subsidence, they started back towards the ranche. By this time the rain-pour had ceased, and the atmosphere had become comparatively quiet. This was unfortunate for the skulking trio ; for as the Texan horses returned along the rocky path,

their shod hoofs rang clear upon the stones, and challenged a neigh from the other animals. It was loud enough to betray them; and in less than ten minutes after, all three were prisoners—taken without resistance. Almost without trial, had they to submit to their fate—a fearful one. Their captors, furious, frenzied, only waited to ascertain their reason for being there. The questions were quick, and the responses ready. With a score of rifles pointed at their heads and breasts, there was not much likelihood of hesitation. Nor did they equivocate. They had no time to make up a story; and they told the truth. Alas! it did not save them. Their examiners and judges were still half insane with rage and disappointment; the time for mercy had gone out of their hearts; and in fifteen minutes after, the bodies of the three lancers were swinging from the pecan trees, by the necks, their own lazos affording the means for their suspension.

* * * * *

Nearly two days passed before the torrent could be stemmed. There was not a minute lost after

it was discovered to be fordable; and when at length forded, it tried the strength of the Texan horses, and the courage of the men. Without serious accident they got through the cañon, and ascended to the upper level. As they rode up between the two hills, and caught sight of the open plain, there was nothing to cheer, or pilot them on their way. The storm had obliterated every track left by the lancers, long since departed from the spot. Two days', full two days', clear start, there was slight chance of their being overtaken. Perhaps they could not now be *trailed*? If not, their pursuers might as well have stayed in the valley.

Their course now promised to be only guess-work. And it would have been so to any others than prairie men or Texan Rangers. For these there were still guides—and they knew it. Not compass, or chronometer; but guides to them equally reliable: the sun, the stars, the plants of the desert, and their own knowledge of how to read them. True, these would only give them the direction which the pursued party had taken;

and the twice-traitor Manuel had already told them of that. It was due west, within a point or two ; and westward they went.

For the first ten or fifteen miles there could be no difficulty. Hamersley and Walt knew the route by which the troop had approached the portals of the valley. It was natural to suppose they would return on the same path. No trace could be discovered, either of their coming or going. Anyhow, there would not be much on the hard sun-baked surface of the Llano Estacado. But such as had been was now gone—obliterated by the dust and the rain. It mattered not for a time. The black-jack grove came in sight, a landmark so far reliable. Headed by Wilder and Hamersley, the Rangers made direct for it. It was a ride of over ten miles ; and would be a suitable place for a short stoppage ; long enough for the chewing of a quid or the smoking of a pipe, and for swallowing a morsel of cooked deer-meat by those who were hungry.

On arriving at the spot, their uncertainty was at an end. Fires long since cold ; pieces of tor-

tilla cake scattered over the ground ; scraps of tasajo the ants had not yet eaten up ; other odds and ends, told them where the lancer troop had stayed during the storm.

Thenceforward the trail was a clear one—all the more from the damp surface, rendered soft by the rain. Beyond, they followed it with no more difficulty than if they had been riding along a turnpike road.

It led them to the Pecos ; to a point now well known, from having been forded by more than one of the reconnoitering parties since sent out by the government of the United States. Then it had been only crossed by Mexicans and Indians. It was the crossing-place of the old Spanish military road running between Santa Fé and San Antonio ; the same whose far-spread finger-posts gave to the sterile tract adjoining it the name by which it is now known—‘ El Elano Estacado.’

The Texans waded their horses across the stream, and spurred out upon the western bank. Up to this point it was all plain sailing, and they had not needed to lose a moment in taking up

the trail. They were cheered by finding it fresher as they advanced ; for they were travelling at a more rapid rate than the troop of lancers. Though these had not gone so very slow : since their leader had also a motive for making time. But not one so pressing as that which agitated the breasts of the pursuers.

On the western bank of the Pecos the Rangers were brought to a stand, and for some time kept in a state of perplexity. The sign was no longer so legible. In fact, it was obscure, and taxed the oldest and most experienced trackers to read it. The trail forked, becoming two instead of one. The troop had there divided—one portion of it continuing on to the west, the other striking in a north-westerly direction up the bank of the stream. That trending westward showed a majority of tracks. The hoof-prints on the up-river trail were few—in all not over a dozen. What could have been the cause of the separation ?

No one could tell—not even the brown-skinned traitor, with a pistol once more held to his head. The partition of the troop, however, was not the

important question. It was of far more significance to know with which division had gone its chief, and still more the captives.

Like two old beagles on a lost scent, when the young dogs have been thrown off, Cully and Wilder were quartering the ground some distance ahead. Soon the latter gave tongue.

‘Hyar, Frank! hyar’s the track o’ yur ole Kaintuck; an’ we know he war rid by thet skunk o’ a kurnel. An’ hyar’s the yellur mustang, as carried yar gurl, the saynoreeta. I ked swar to it ’mong a hul cavayurt. Them as we wants goed this way—sartin sure.’

The captain, Cully, the man in the green blanket coat, and others of prominent position in the band of Texas Rangers, bent over the sign to which Walt had drawn their attention. They gave it but slight examination; for they could trust to their old comrade, and knew he had read it correctly.

It would have pleased them better, if the lancer troop had kept together. Then they might have had a fight, a grander *coup*, and more glory

in the conquest. To pursue the smaller party was like chasing a rabbit instead of a panther or bear. It would be but a poor satisfaction to strike down a half-score of hated foemen, instead of fifty. They even talked of themselves separating into two parties, and following up the forked trail. But the prudent Captain Haynes would not hear of it; and, backed by the pleading of the young Kentuckian, still more by an appeal from their old associate Wilder, they became once more of one mind; and all turned their faces in the same direction—north-westerly, along the bank of the Pecos.





CHAPTER XIX.

A SYLVAN SCENE.

ON the banks of a small stream having its source in the Sierra Blanca, and running eastwardly towards the Pecos, two tents are standing. One of them is an ordinary single-pole soldier's tent, the other an oval-shaped marquee.

Inside the latter are two feminine forms—a lady, and one who appears to be her waiting-maid. The other is occupied by two officers in the uniform of Mexican lancers—very similar to that worn by the same arm in the French army.

Some half-score lancers are loitering near, one of them standing beside two men, who lie prostrate under a tree—their feet fast bound, and hands tied behind their backs, proclaiming them to be prisoners.

The reader will recognise the party as that of Colonel Gil Uruga and his captives; his troop diminished to ten men—the rest having separated from him on the Pecos River, at a point fifty miles below, and by his command gone direct on to the Del Norte. He is on a route leading north-westward to Santa Fé, the capital of the state; whither he intends taking his prisoners, in order that they shall be tried by the chief military court of the department. This, at least, was the story told to his alferez, when ordering him to take the troop direct on to Albuquerque.

The tents are not pitched near any road. The old San Antonio trail passes about two miles below; never used by white men since Texas became independent; and only travelled by Indians—Apaches, and Comanches. Uruga was upon it after crossing the Pecos; but he had left it for the valley of the stream, on which we now find him encamped.

Had sylvan beauty influenced him in selecting the site of his encampment, he could not, in all the wide West, have found a more perfect spot.

A soft landscape, dotted with groves of the lovely *alamo* trees, that reflected their verdure in the stream silently stealing beneath their shadows, here and there flashing into the open light like a thread of silver, and extending across glades green with the rich *gramma* grass. A landscape not all woodland and mead, but with a mountain aspect as well; for the sandstone cliffs that on both sides bound the valley bottom rose high into the heavens, less than a quarter of a mile apart, appearing like grim giant warriors ready to begin battle, while the tall stems of the organ-cactus projecting above represented their poised spears.

It was a scene at once soft and sublime—a garden of Paradise, fenced-in by a high graceful wall of roughest rock-work; below sweetly smiling—above darkly frowning, and weirdly picturesque. A wilderness scene as well, with all its charms. Uninhabited; no house in sight; no domestic hearth, nor chimney near; no smoke, save that curling up from the fire late kindled in the soldiers' camp; beasts and birds its only denizens; its meadow-like openings the range of the antelope

and black-tailed deer; its shaggy bluffs the abode of the grizzly bear; its groves musical with birds of bright plumage; while soaring above, or perched on prominent points of the cliff, the *caracara*, the buzzard, and the white-headed eagle.

In one of the pleasantest and most picturesque spots of this river-valley, Uraga had pitched his tents; an open tract of about six acres in extent, and nearly circular in shape; lying within the embrace of an umbrageous wood, the trees being cottonwoods of the largest dimensions. Through its midst the streamlet meandered—above issuing from the wood, and below again entering it.

On one side the cliffs could be seen rising darkly above the tree-tops, and in the concavity of the opening on this side the tents had been erected, close in to the wood edge; though a considerable distance apart from each other. The horses, tied to their trail-ropes, were browsing upon the bank of the stream; and above, upon a projecting promontory of the bluff, a flock of vultures were sunning themselves with outspread wings, now and then uttering an ominous croak,

as they craned their necks outward, and looked down upon the encampment below.

It was with no eye to scenic beauty that Uraga had chosen this spot for a camping-place. On the contrary, for a purpose so atrocious that no one could give credit to it—that is, no one unacquainted with the frontier military life of Northern Mexico as it has been in days past—in the days of the dictator Santa Anna and his New Mexican imitator Armijo. This purpose could be gleaned from a conversation between Uraga and his adjutant, which took place inside Uraga's tent, some time after it had been pitched.

But before defiling the fair scene we have painted by any thoughts of the dark scheme then and there disclosed, let us seek gentler society in the marquee set apart for Adela Miranda.

It scarce needs to say that a change was observable in the appearance of this lady. Her dress, stained with travel, exhibited souvenirs of the dust-storm and the rain; her hair, escaped from its coif, hung down dishevelled; her cheeks showed the lily, where the rose had habitually bloomed.

Adela Miranda was sad, drooping, despondent. The Indian damsel seemed to have suffered less from her captivity; but this might be from having less to afflict her—no dread of a terrible sacrifice, such as sat like an incubus upon the mind of her mistress. Conchita had become the comforter.

‘Don’t grieve so, señorita,’ she said; ‘I’m sure it will be all right yet. Something whispers me it will. It may be the good Virgin—bless her! I heard one of the soldiers say that they were taking us to Santa Fé, and that Don Valerian would be tried by a court-martial—I think the man called it. Well, what of it? You know Colonel Miranda hasn’t done anything for which they could condemn him to death—unless they downright murdered him; and they dare not do that, tyrants as they are.’

At the words ‘murdered him’ the señorita started. It was this thought that was making her so sad. Too well she knew the man into whose hands her brother had again fallen. She remembered his design, before so near succeeding,

and only frustrated by that hurried flight which had made them exiles. Was it likely the fiend would be contented to take her brother back now, and trust to the decision of a legal tribunal, civil or military? She could not believe it; and shuddered as she reflected upon what was before them.

‘Besides,’ said Conchita, pursuing her consolatory strain, ‘Don Francisco, and my big brave Gualtero, have gone before us. They will be in New Mexico when we get there, and will be sure to hear of our arrival. Don’t you think, señorita, they can do something for Don Valerian?’

‘No, no,’ despondingly answered Adela, ‘not for my brother. That is beyond their power—even if poor Valerian should ever reach Santa Fé. I fear he never will—perhaps none of us.’

‘*Santissima!* what do you mean, señorita? Surely these men would not murder us?’

‘They are capable of doing that, or anything else. Ah, Conchita, you cannot know all. I am in as much danger as my brother; for I shall choose death rather than —’

She hesitated to speak the word.

‘O, señorita, if you have to die, so will I. Dear *dueña*, I am ready to die with you.’

The ‘*dueña*’ (mistress), deeply affected by this proffer of devotion, flung her white arms around the neck of the brown-skinned maiden, and imprinted upon her brow a kiss inspired by heartfelt gratitude.

The tender scene was cut short by the incoming of Uraga, or rather by the appearance of his hated face protruded into the entrance of the tent.

‘Is there anything I can do for the señorita?’ he asked, speaking in a tone of mock humility; ‘anything she would eat or drink, which our poor camp-fare may provide for her?’

‘No, señor,’ was the quick response, somewhat defiantly spoken. ‘I am neither hungry nor thirsty. If you have food or drink to spare, you will do me a greater gratification by giving them to your prisoners. I think they stand more in need of them.’

‘In that the señorita is mistaken. My prisoners—I am sorry that duty requires me to call them so—have been amply served all along the

course of our somewhat rough journey. Though compelled to carry them in bonds that may not be agreeable to them, I shall take care, señorita, that no act of inhumanity be shown them. Our journey will soon be at an end; and then it is to be hoped they will have a better time of it.'

As the ruffian said this, a grin truly diabolical sat upon his sinister features. It was as well that she to whom the speech was addressed did not perceive it, else she might have drawn from it suspicions of dread significance. With her long dark lashes down during the whole conversation, she seemed to decline looking upon the face of the man she so thoroughly detested.

Seeing there was nothing to be gained by farther false proffers of gallantry, he withdrew, and went back to his tent; as he passed the interval between, biting his lips with chagrin, and muttering threats, that were soon after communicated to the ears of his adjutant—the companion of his crimes and part sharer in his plunderings.



CHAPTER XX.

A FIENDISH SCHEME.

To understand the exact situation in which Uraga stood to his captives, some words of explanation may be necessary.

The reader already knows of his hatred for Don Valerian Miranda; and his love—if such love as his deserve the name—for Don Valerian's sister. It was, at all events, a passion deep and absorbing; and perhaps would of itself have led to the dark deeds already committed by him, and the atrocious schemes he had conceived.

But, in addition to his love, low as it was, another passion was inspiring him—cupidity. The large estate held by Colonel Miranda—previous to the revolution that had made him a refugee—was not yet confiscated. The new authorities hesitated

to do this, on account of the danger of a measure so high-handed. It required a certain judicial authority, leading to long delay; for, even in Mexico, each new dictator has to deal delicately at first, until he can feel himself firmly established in his despotic power.

Even if the *hacienda* of the patriot colonel should be ultimately condemned to forfeiture, only one half of it would be forfeit to the State. The other moiety was the property of his sister, left to her by will; and this could not legally be touched. Adela Miranda would be rich—even if her brother should be reduced to pauperism, or condemned to a felon's death.

Uraga knew all this; and, in addition to his other desire, it formed a powerful incentive to his wishing her for a wife. Although he was living in the house where she and her brother had been born—and from which he had been himself so instrumental in expelling them—he was there but as a lodger. He wanted to be the owner, not only of the mansion, but the broad *terrain* that surrounded it—on every side stretching for

leagues. This had been, and still was, the ambition of his life. He had yet but a dim idea of how it was to be realised. Notwithstanding a good deal of low cunning, his brain was but that of a brute—too dull to see beyond the act of the hour. His reasoning extended no farther; else would he have understood that the course he had resolved upon pursuing could not possibly accomplish his purpose, unless backed by still farther acts of atrocity and violence. He believed that if Miranda were once out of the way, he would be able to overcome the obstacles that separated him from the sister; that, left unprotected, she would yield to his solicitations—he himself approaching her in the full plenitude of power which he now enjoyed. This had been his scheme when he intended to have the patriot colonel taken surreptitiously from his prison, and dispatched among the defiles of the mountains. He would himself have taken the life of Valerian Miranda—assassinated him—without thought of remorse, could he have been certain of doing it undiscovered, or without danger. No opportunity had as yet offered—even

while making him a prisoner for the second time. Lawless as were the deeds of the Mexican soldiery, there was still some shame left, or at least a trace of responsibility. But for this, Miranda would not now have been lying bound under the shade of a cottonwood tree. He would have been sleeping his last sleep in the valley of the Lone Ranche.

He might still be supposed near to death, by one who could have heard the conversation that took place between Uraga and Roblez, as the former came angrily back to his tent.

‘How long are we to remain here?’ was the question asked by the adjutant.

‘*Carrai!* that is an interrogatory not so easily answered. It depends—’

‘On what, señor coronel?’

‘O, on many things; events, incidents, and circumstances. You would like to know them, *ayudante*?’

‘I am all anxiety, colonel.’

‘Very well, *camarado*, you shall. But you must give me leave first to take a drink of aguardiente, and then to light a cigar. The interview I’ve had

with the señorita, short as it was, has made me thirsty ; and will require a little tobacco-smoke to neutralise the intoxicating perfume of her sweet presence, still clinging around me.'

After this clumsy attempt at a jest, Uraga poured out some liquor from his canteen-flask ; drank it off ; and then, lighting his cigaritto, proceeded with the promised explanation.

'I spoke of events, incidents, and circumstances—didn't I, Roblez ?'

'You did, colonel.'

'Well ; suppose I clump them all together, and give you the story in a simple narrative—a monologue ? I know, friend Roblez, you're not a man much given to speech ; so, that will save you the necessity of opening your mouth till I've got through.'

Roblez, who, as already said, was rather a silent sort of scoundrel, nodded assent.

'Well ; I've told you plain enough,' continued Uraga, 'that I have no intention of taking Valerian Miranda, or the quack of a doctor, to the Del Norte. I don't care a *claco* about the life of the

latter ; but it's expedient *he should die—to save exposure.* He knows too much of past events, as you yourself are aware. Both must die. Of course I don't intend killing them myself. Nor yet can it be done by my men ; though the cutthroats would be ready enough, if I but gave them the hint. That too might lead to scandal, and beget trouble. To avoid both, I've engaged an executioner ; who will do the job without taking any direct orders from me.'

‘Who?’ asked Roblez, forgetting his promise to be silent.

‘Don't interrupt, and I will tell you the whole story. It will interest you ; and, when you have heard it, I venture to say you will give me credit for strategy—as you have done before now.’

The subordinate in military rank, but equal in criminality, simply nodded in the affirmative.

‘Of course,’ continued Uraga, in a tone of serio-comicality, ‘you have heard of a copper-coloured gentleman called “Horned Lizard.” If I mistake not, you have the honour of his acquaintance. And if I mistake not still farther, you will

see him here during the course of the evening, or, at all events, at an early hour to-morrow morning. He will make his appearance in somewhat eccentric fashion. No doubt, he will come up to our camp in a charging gallop—some fifty or a hundred of his painted warriors with him. And I shouldn't wonder if they should spit our poor lancers on the points of their spears. That will depend on whether our *valientes* are foolish enough to make resistance. I don't think they will; and more likely we shall see them gallop off, or go skulking into these cottonwoods, at the first whoop of their savage assailants. You and I, Roblez, will have to do the same; but, as gallant gentlemen, we must take the ladies along with us. To abandon them to the mercy of the savages, without making an effort to save them, would be accounted absolute poltroonery. It would never do to be told in the settlements; therefore we must do our best to take them along. Of course, we can't be blamed for not being able to save our male prisoners; and their fate, I much fear, will be to have, each of them, half-a-dozen Comanche

spears thrust through his body. It's sad to think of it, but these things cannot always be avoided. They are but the ordinary incidents of life on this disturbed frontier. Now, *señor ayudante*, I suppose you understand me ?

‘ Since I am at length permitted to speak, I would say that I do. At least, I have an obscure comprehension of it. Your story, colonel, fully translated, means this. You have arranged with the Horned Lizard to make a counterfeit attack upon our camp ; to shoot down, or spear, our half-score of poor devils of lancers, if need be.’

‘ There won't be any need for him to do that. They'll run like good fellows at the first yell of the Indians. Don't be uneasy about them.’

‘ In any case, the Horned Lizard is to kill our two prisoners, and so take the scandal of their assassination off your hands. If I understand aright, that is the programme.’

‘ *It is.*’



CHAPTER XXI.

AWAITING THE ASSASSINS.

IN order to carry through his diabolical scheme with the most perfect convenience, and without risk of miscarriage, Uraga had taken certain precautions in the selection of his camp, as also in its arrangement. The men prisoners were kept apart, and at a distance from the tent occupied by the women ; while Uraga's own tent stood between. The horses of the troopers were picketed at some distance off on the meadow ; while those of Uraga and Roblez, along with Lolita and the mule that gave transport to the *mestiza*, were tied to the trees—a little to the rear of the marquee tent. All were under the saddle, with slip halters on, the bits taken off to enable them to browse.

Some three hundred yards down the stream a

single lancer had been posted to act as a picket guard. His orders were at once to gallop in and give warning, should any one be seen coming up the valley. There was no sentry stationed on the opposite side. Uruga did not deem it necessary. He had said nothing to the soldiers of how long they would be halted—only to keep their horses under the saddle, and themselves in readiness at any moment to bridle and mount them. He knew not, himself, how soon that order would be issued.

His design was whenever the picket sentinel should report the approach of the savages to create by his own action and that of his adjutant a stampede of their little party; and, as the Indian yells would be heard shortly after, there would be just time for the lancers to take to their horses and gallop off. In a *suave qui peut* scramble they would not trouble themselves about the brace of bound prisoners lying under the trees; he knew his troop of cutthroats well enough for that. For himself and Roblez, it would be gallantry enough to save the women, by hurrying both

into their saddles, and taking them along in the flight. The Indian damsel they did not care for, and perhaps would have left her to care for herself; but as their escape would be easy, and the savages would not pursue them very hotly or very far, Conchita would be but a slight encumbrance.

It was certainly an original way to get rid of their captives without being called to account for their assassination; a conception as cunning as atrocious; but in the military history of Mexico such chapters of atrocity are not uncommon.

Meanwhile the two prisoners lying side by side could communicate with each other; though not without every word being heard by the sentry who stood over them. Had not both received a classic education, not a secret could have passed between them. This, however, enabled them to talk without being understood—in Latin. It was probably the first time Miranda had ever found this dead language of service to him, though Don Prospero may have obtained advantage from it in his philosophical pursuits.

No ancient Roman ever used it to give expres-

sion to gloomier thoughts; for in the minds of both were the most fearful forebodings. Too well they remembered that plot overheard by Don Prospero—when Miranda lay wounded within the *cuartel* prison. It was but natural they should now be apprehensive of a similar cruel design. They knew that Gil Uruga was capable of the darkest deed in the calendar of crime.

It seemed strange his having divided his troop, sending the larger portion of it on to Albuquerque. They had heard from their guards, that they were being carried to Santa Fé—there to be tried. It would have been pleasant for them to believe this. They could not.

There was mystery too in Uruga's movements about the camp. They could see him now and then as he passed out of his tent, and hear him in muttered conversation with his fellow-ruffian Roblez. Once, as he was seen to enter and stay some time within the marquee, Miranda's heart was torn with wild thoughts—fears for the safety of his sister.

He was not allowed to hold communication

with her, nor she with him. This had been interdicted all along the route since leaving the ranche. Even messages were prohibited from passing between them. Everything relating to one another was doubt in the minds of both—a very anguish of suspense. From glimpses they now and then obtained of Uraga, the prisoners could see that there was something unusual in his demeanour. He moved uneasily into and out of his tent; and once passed from the camp in the direction of where the picket had been placed. He was absent for a considerable interval. As he came back, his countenance expressed disappointment; as if he had expected some one who had not yet arrived. After a while, he again went forth—going down the valley as before, and also as before on foot. This time he went beyond the point where the picket sentry had been ordered to keep watch.

Some two hundred paces below, a spur of the cliff sloped down to the bank of the stream, there ending in an elevated bluff, the top of which was easily attained. Climbing up to it, he bent his

gaze eastward and down the stream. There the timber, growing only in scattered clumps, gave him a view of the grass-covered plain spreading between.

A man on it could be seen more than a mile off; and shortly after, one was seen at about this distance, coming up the valley. He was mounted on a mule, that appeared jaded by a long journey, from the way in which he was urging it forward. Evidently the rider was in more haste than the animal, his arms and legs being all four in motion, while the mule seemed with difficulty to drag one limb after another.

‘That must be one of my messengers,’ muttered Uraga, as the mule-rider first came in sight. ‘It is!’ he continued, as the man drew near enough to be recognised. ‘It’s José. He appears to be alone. He is. What can be the reason? Where’s Pedrillo? What can it mean, I wonder?’

He was kept wondering, until José rode up to the spot; and perceiving his master, dismounted and approached him. In the messenger’s coun-

tenance there was the look of disappointment, and something more. There was a tale of woe, and reluctance to disclose it.

‘Where is Pedrillo?’ was the first question, asked in a tone of impatience.

‘O, señor coronel!’ said José, hat in hand, and trembling in every joint. ‘Pedrillo! Poor Pedrillito!’

‘Well! Poor Pedrillito—what has happened to him?’

‘Your excellency, I fear to tell you.’

‘Tell it, sirrah, and at once, or I’ll send a bullet through your stupid skull! Out with it, whatever it is.’

‘Alas, poor Pedrillito—he’s gone!’

‘Gone—whither?’

‘Down the river.’

‘What river?’

‘The Pecos, your excellency.’

‘Gone down the Pecos! On what errand?’ asked Uraga, in surprise.

‘On no errand, señor coronel.’

‘Then what’s taken him down the Pecos?’

‘The flood, your excellency. He did not go of his own will. It was only his dead body that went. It was carried down.’

‘Drowned? Pedrillo drowned?’

‘*Aye de mi!* It is true, señor coronel. *Pobre—pobrecito!*’

‘How did this happen, José?’

‘We were crossing at the ford. The waters were up, from a norté there’s been out on the plains. The river was deep, and running rapid like a torrent. Pedrillo’s *macho* stumbled, and was swept off. It was as much as mine could do to keep its feet. I think Pedrillo must have got his feet stuck in the *estribos*; for I could see him struggling alongside and clinging to the mule, till both went under. When they came to the surface again, they were drowned dead. They floated on without making a motion, except what the flood gave them as their bodies were tossed about in the water. As I could do nothing, señor coronel, I hastened on to tell you what had happened. Pobre Pedrillito!’

A cloud darkened the brow of Uraga, though

it had little to do with the death of Pedrillo, or compassion for his fate. This he scarcely thought of. His trouble was, as to whether there had been a miscarriage in the message of which the drowned man had been more especially the bearer. His next interrogatory, quickly put, was to get satisfied on this head.

‘ You reached the Tenawa town ?’

‘ We did, señor coronel.’

‘ Pedrillo had a message for the chief, the Horned Lizard, and a letter for Sanchez. You knew that, I suppose ?’

‘ Pedrillo told me so.’

‘ Well, you saw him deliver the letter to Sanchez ?’

‘ He did not deliver it to Sanchez.’

‘ To the Horned Lizard, then ?’

‘ To neither, your excellency. He could not.’

‘ Could not ! What do you mean, sirrah ?’

‘ They were not there to receive it. They are no longer in this world—neither the Horned Lizard nor Sanchez. O, señor coronel, the Tenawa have met with a great misfortune. They have

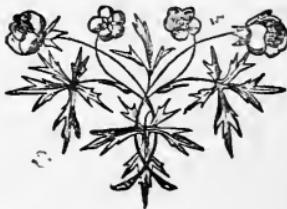
had a fight with a party of Tejanos. The chief is killed, Sanchez is killed, and nearly half of all the warriors. We found the tribe in mourning, the women all painted black, and their hair cut off; the men who had escaped from the fight cowed, and hiding in their lodges.'

A fierce exclamation burst from the lips of Uraga as he received these disclosures, while the cloud gathered darker on his brow.

'But Pedrillo,' he inquired, after a pause—'what did he say to them? He had a message, you know. Did he make it known to the survivors?'

'He did, your excellency. They could not read the letter; but he told them what it was about. They were to meet you here, he said. But they would not come; they were in too great distress at the death of their chief, and the terrible defeat they had received. They were in fear that the Tejanos would come into their town; and were making preparations to leave it, when Pedrillo and myself came away. Pobre Pedrillito!'

As Uraga walked back to his camp, followed by the bearer of bad tidings—who led his tired mule tremblingly after—the cloud upon his brow appeared blacker than ever.





CHAPTER XXII.

A SINGULAR DESPATCH.

THE Rangers, trailing the detached and smaller party of lancers up the bank of the Pecos, were making all the haste in their power; Hamersley and Wilder every now and then saying a word to urge them on.

In pursuit of such an enemy, the Texans needed no pressing. It was only the irrestrainable impatience of the two men, whose souls were tortured by the apprehension of some dark danger hovering over the heads of those dear to them. They found no difficulty in following the trail of the troopers and their captives. The soldiers' horses were shod; and the late storm, sweeping the plain and washing it with a torrent of rain,

had obliterated all old tracks, leaving a clear surface, on which the new hoof-prints were not only distinct, but conspicuous. So much, indeed, that the craft of Cully, Walt, and other skilled trackers, was not called into requisition ; the Rangers riding along the trail as fast as their horses could carry them.

It was plain, that the pursued party had taken no pains to *blind* its tracks. Why should they? Uraga could have no idea or suspicion of being followed ; certainly not of being pursued ; and still less by such pursuers. He had thought it a little strange, that the corporal with the two lancers—sent back after the peon traitor—had not sooner overtaken him. Still, there was nothing in that to cause uneasiness or alarm. They might have been detained in their search for the skulker, or by some other trifling accident. Perhaps the storm had delayed them in the valley. This was the likeliest solution ; as he remembered Manuel in his minute description of the topography of the valley having said something about occasional stoppages caused by the floods. In all

likelihood, this was what had hindered the corporal and his file from sooner rejoining their comrades. But they would easily get upon the track of the troop; and be sure to follow the larger party on to Albuquerque.

Had the lancer colonel, while making these reflections, only known the true state of the case—that his trio of troopers, instead of proceeding to Albuquerque, were at that moment suspended by their necks to the branches of a pecan tree—he would have been more cautious about the path on which he was himself proceeding, and have taken more pains to avoid leaving a plain trail behind him.

Along it the Rangers rode rapidly; gratified to observe that it grew fresher as they advanced—for they were travelling twice as fast as the men who had made it.

All at once they were summoned to a stop, by the sight of what never fails to bring the most hurried travellers to a halt—the dead body of a man.

This was lying on a sand-spit that projected out

into the river—the Pecos—where it had evidently been washed by the waters, now subsiding after the freshet, due to the late tornado. Near by, was the carcass of a mule, deposited in a similar manner. Both were conspicuous enough as the Rangers came abreast of the spit ; but their attention had been called to them long before by a flock of buzzards, some hovering above, and some alighted near the corpse of the man, and some by the carcass of the mule.

Half-a-dozen of the Rangers, heading their horses down the sloping bank, rode out upon the sand-spit to give examination to the 'sign'—so sad, yet so terribly attractive. It would tempt scrutiny anywhere ; but in the prairie wilderness, or the dangerous desert, it might be the means of guiding to a path of safety, or warding off from one that was perilous.

While the half-dozen who had detached themselves proceeded out upon the sand-bar, the main body of the Rangers, remaining upon the high bank, awaited their return.

Walt Wilder was among those who had gone

out to examine the corpse and carcass. The former was that of an Indian, but not of the *Indios bravos*, or savage tribes. Wearing a striped woollen *tilma*, with coarse cotton shirt underneath, wide sheepskin breeches extending only a little below the knees, and rude raw-hide sandals upon his feet, he was evidently of the *tamed*, or christianised aborigines ; those whom the Catholic *padres*, in their missionary zeal, have succeeded in winning from their wild wicked ways, and trained to a degradation nearer to the brute than that to which Nature—even in their most savage state—had ever reduced them.

There were no marks of violence on the body either of the man, or the mule. The case was clear at a glance. It was one of drowning ; and the swollen stream, still foaming past, was evidence eloquent of how it had happened. On the man's body there were found no signs of rifling or robbery. His pockets, when turned inside out, yielded such contents as might be expected on the person of an *Indio manso*.

Only one thing, in the eyes of the examina-

tors, appeared out of place: a sheet of paper folded in the form of a letter, and sealed with wax. It was saturated with water, and stained to the hue of the still turbid stream. But the superscription could be read: '*Por Sanchez.*'

So much Cully and Walt could make out for themselves. On breaking open the seal, and endeavouring to decipher what was written inside, both were at fault. They could not understand a word of it, for it was written in a language that was a sealed book to both. It was in Spanish. Without staying any longer to attempt translating it, Walt Wilder hastened back to the river bank, taking the letter along with him.

On rejoining the Rangers, he handed it to Hamersley; who first read, and then translated it aloud. It ran as follows:

'Friend Sanchez,—As soon as you receive this, communicate its contents to the chief. Tell him I want him to meet me on the Alamo Creek—same place as before; and that he is to bring with him twenty or thirty of his painted devils. The lesser

number will be enough, as it's not an affair of either fighting or danger. Come yourself with them. You will find me encamped with a small party—some women, and two male prisoners. No matter about the women. It's the men you have to deal with ; and this is what you are to do. Charge upon the camp the moment you get sight of it ; make the redskins shout like fiends, and ride forward, brandishing their spears. You won't meet any resistance ; nor find any one on the ground when you've got there, only our two prisoners—who will be fast bound, and cannot escape with us. What's to be done with them, querido Sanchez, is the important part—in fact, the whole play. Tell the chief they are to be killed upon the spot ; thrust through with your spears as soon as you get up. See to this yourself, lest there be any mischance ; and I'll take care you shall have your reward.'

On learning the contents of this vile epistle, the rage of the Rangers, already sufficiently aroused, became almost boundless ; and, for a while, sought vent in the most fearful threats

and asseverations. Though there was no name appended to the diabolical chapter of instructions, they could have no doubt as to who had been the writer. Circumstances, present and antecedent, pointed to the Mexican colonel Uruga, of whom they were in pursuit.

But who was Sanchez, the man to whom the letter was addressed,—his name still legible on the outside?

A wild cry went up, almost simultaneously from the whole troop, as they turned their faces towards the renegade, who, as a prisoner, was still with them. The wretch became pale, as if all the blood had been abruptly drawn out of his veins. Without comprehending the exact import of that cry, he could read in forty pairs of eyes, glaring angrily around him, that his last hour had come.

They had no doubt, now, as to whom the letter had been addressed; and they could tell why it had miscarried. Indeed, the renegade had already disclosed his name; not thinking it would thus turn up to condemn and doom him to death.

Yes—to death ; for although he had been promised life, with only the punishment of a prison, these conditions related to another criminality, and were granted without the full knowledge of his guilt—his connivance in crimes unparalleled in atrocity. His late judges felt themselves absolved from every stipulation of pardon or mercy ; and, summoning to the judgment-seat the quicker, and still more stern decreer—Lynch—in less than five minutes after, the renegade was launched into eternity !

There was reason for their haste. They knew that the letter had miscarried ; but he who could have dictated such a damnable epistle was a tiger set loose, who could not be too soon destroyed.





CHAPTER XXIII.

A NEW DETERMINATION.

FOR the disaster that had occurred to the Tenawa Comanches Colonel Gil Uraga did not care a fig; only so far as that, by the death of the Horned Lizard, he had lost an ally who might have been of service on some future occasion of robbery or retaliation. The same sort of sorrow he felt for his confederate Sanchez; though to a less degree, since the renegade had less power to assist him in his nefarious deeds.

After all, it mattered not now so much. In his capacity of military chief of a district he had attained a point of power—ill-gotten and arbitrary—that rendered him to some extent independent of any secret or left-handed assistance.

His greatest chagrin on getting the report of

José was, that the Indian disaster had thwarted his present well-conceived plan of assassination; and as he walked back towards the camp, he was busy with black thoughts in search of some new scheme to effect this purpose.

He could have murdered the two prisoners with his own hand; and without compunction he would have done so on the spot, and at that moment, but for the fear of tell-tale tongues, and the consequences that might accrue. Stark naked assassination would certainly compromise him. How was he to avoid this danger by giving a colour to the deed?

Perhaps his fellow-ruffian, Roblez, could suggest some way of getting over the difficulty; and on reaching the camp-ground, he motioned the latter to follow him into his tent.

‘It’s all over, Roblez; the luck appears to be against us.’

‘I see one of your messengers has returned, colonel; how about the other?’

‘Pedrillo. Poor devil! he will never return here or elsewhere. From what José has told me,

he's now on a voyage down the Pecos, along with his mule.'

'I do not comprehend you, colonel.'

'Pedrillo is defunct. His animal stumbled with him while crossing the river. There's high water just now, and the flood swept both downstream—drowned dead. That's the tale of José. *Carajo!* not the worst part of it.'

'What is there worse?'

'Our friend the Horned Lizard is also defunct—gone to his happy hunting-grounds, with about half his band of beauties; and they have taken Sanchez with them.'

'*Carrai!* How has that happened?'

'*Los Tejanos!* They've had a fight with a party of these out on the plains, and got the worst of it. A bloody encounter that has thinned the tribe terribly—one half, they told my messengers, who found them in mourning and loud lamentation.'

'Then they are not coming here?'

'Of course not. That's the worst of it. This bit of crooked luck spoils all my plans, and we are left to our own resources.'

‘What do you intend doing now?’

‘I intend nothing as yet. This unexpected affair has frustrated my scheme, and leaves me without one. Can you think of any?’

The adjutant remained for a moment silent, as if reflecting. He at length said, somewhat hesitatingly :

‘Are you still determined on—’

‘On what?’

‘The death of the prisoners?’

Uruga responded by pointing to the scar on his cheek; and then, with a still more diabolical expression on his countenance, nodded towards the tent that contained the women. Roblez understood the pantomime.

‘Now more than ever am I determined on it,’ said the implacable fiend; ‘now that the other has escaped me; though there is a chance to get hold of him yet. If he make but ten days’ stay in the territory of New Mexico, ’tis all I shall ask. And that reminds me, we’ve not much time to waste here. I must make sure of Miranda while he’s in my power, and without any

farther delay. Come, *ayudante* ! quicken your thoughts, and help me to a plan.'

Roblez, with a cigar between his teeth, again spent some time in seeming reflection. Whether it was, that a spark of humanity yet lingered in his heart, or that he did not see the necessity of such a sacrifice, or that he apprehended from it some future danger to himself—which of these, or whatever was the motive in his *mind*—he was evidently inclined to give counsel against killing the prisoners.

'Colonel Uraga,' he said at length, addressing his superior in a strain of friendly familiarity, 'I wish to speak plain with you. It is for your sake, and I hope you won't be offended. Do you give me permission to ask you a question ?'

'Ask it,' gruffly conceded the colonel.

'You want the *señorita* for your wife ?'

Uraga gave utterance to an exclamation, accompanied by a fierce grimace. But no verbal answer. He only nodded assent.

'In that case, *mio amigo*,' said the adjutant, continuing the tone of familiarity, 'it appears to

me that the best way to accomplish your end would be to offer Miranda his life.'

'How?'

'Let him know that he is going to die, and surely—or let him *think* it, which will serve all the same; say that you and I have condemned him by court-martial, which indeed we have the power to do. Offer him life in return for his giving consent to your marriage with his sister. If he refuse, then try the effect of the same offer upon her. That's what *I* would do, if I were in your shoes, and in a like dilemma.'

'Bah! what would all that lead to? Supposing that by such means I obtain the consent of both, do you think they would adhere to it—even upon oath? Once back to the Del Norte, with the world to witness such a deed, they would easily withdraw from it. You forget the old adage, *ayudante*: "One man may take a horse to the water, but twenty can't make him drink."'

'In this case, colonel, it don't apply; for you needn't take your horse to the water—at least not so far as the Del Norte. You forget that in the

village of Anton Chico, through which we have to pass, there's a priest who, for a couple of *doblones*, will consummate the marriage, and without asking any questions. You understand me better now, colonel ?'

Uraga reflected. Roblez had put the thing in a new light. After all, what harm in letting Miranda live ? It would be enough satisfaction to his vengeful spirit, if he could compel him to consent to the betrothal of his sister, soon after to be followed by the bridal.

' Should he refuse—should both refuse—what then ?' he asked of his subordinate.

' You will be in no worse position than you are now, colonel. You can still carry out your idea of the *court-martial*. But there can be no harm in trying the other plan first.'

' I shall try it,' said Uraga, springing up from his camp-stool, and facing towards the opening of the tent. ' You are right, Roblez. It is a second string to the bow, and may be a better one. I shall try your plan at once. If it fail, let it fail. *Caspita !* if it do, before to-morrow's

sun shows over yonder cliff, the proud beauty will find herself brotherless !'

Saying this, he strode out of the tent, with an air that told of a determination to exact the forced betrothal, or in lieu of it decree the death of Don Valerian Miranda.





CHAPTER XXIV.

CONDITIONS OF FREEDOM.

AFTER stepping forth from the tent, Uraga paused to reflect. The plan suggested by Roblez seemed feasible enough. If he could but force the consent, as proposed, it would not be difficult to get it sealed before anything could intervene to counteract it. The curé of Auton Chico would be obedient to a power superior to the Church—even in that land, the Paradise of *padres*. From him there need be no fear of opposition, nor likely, any scruples about the performance of the ceremony—however strange or suspicious the circumstances might seem to him.

But there were other points to be considered, before proceeding farther with the affair. The lancer escort must not know too much. There

were ten of them—all thorough cutthroats, and, as such, having a fellow-feeling for their colonel and chief. Not one of them but had committed some crime; and more than one who had stained his soul with murder. This was nothing strange in a regiment of Mexican soldiers—under the régime of Santa Anna. It was not rare even among his officers.

On parting with the troop, Uruga had selected his escort with an eye to such sinister contingencies. Yet, although they would have been ready to yield obedience to him in any deed of blood, he did not desire them to penetrate the darkness of his motives. If ordered to shoot or hang the two prisoners, they would have obeyed with the eagerness of bloodhounds let loose from the leash, or wicked *gamins* permitted to indulge in some cruel sport. There could be no difficulty in having the prisoners executed, under the pretence of a condemnation by court-martial, or without—by a simple command from their chief. Therefore, Uruga would not himself need to act directly as the assassin. No poniard or pistol would be required.

A volley of carbines would do the deed—if not more effectually, at least more plausibly.

There was the pretext of patriotism, with the punishment of treason to the State. This would be the pretended motive. It was only the real one Uraga cared to conceal from his escort.

They must not overhear what was now planned between their colonel and his adjutant, as a preliminary of what might follow. Nor should they be within sight to suspect it. It was necessary they should be at a distance from the camp-ground. Securing this was a matter of but slight difficulty to a strategist like Gil Uraga. A plan at once presented itself.

‘*Sergente!*’ he called to the trooper with cheveroned sleeves, in immediate authority over the escort, ‘come hither.’

The sergeant soon stood before him, saluting, and silently awaiting orders.

‘That Indian you see,’ continued his colonel, pointing to José, who was but little known to the soldiers, ‘was on the way with a message to me, in company with another. In crossing the Pecos his

comrade was carried off by the flood. He may, or may not be drowned. In either case go in search of him ; and if you find his body, bring it here. José will guide you to the spot where it was last seen. You will ride down the bank of the river ; though you need not go far. Two or three miles will be far enough. If you don't find trace of him within that distance, then the poor fellow must certainly have sunk to the bottom ; and it would be no use dragging for him. Take all the men with you ; only leave Galvez, who is keeping guard over the prisoners.'

The sergeant, having received these instructions, once more saluted ; and then, returning to the group of lancers, who stood at some distance off, gave the word, 'Boots and saddles.' As there was no saddling to do, they were soon in their saddles and riding away from the ground ; the prisoners' guard alone staying behind, Galvez ; who, being a 'familiar' with his colonel, and more than once his participator in crimes of deepest dye, could be trusted to overhear anything.

The movement had not escaped the observa-

tion of the two men lying tied under the tree. They could not divine its meaning, but neither could they augur well of it. Still worse, when Uraga, signing to Galvez to come to him, muttered some direction in his ear.

It did not tranquillise their fears to know what this was. In fact, their apprehensions were increased, when the sentry again returned to them, and unloosening the cord that bound the ankles of Don Prospero, raised him upon his feet—as if to conduct him from the spot.

On being asked by the prisoners what it was for, Galvez condescended to answer; saying in a gruff voice, that he had orders to separate them, so that, in the absence of the troop, his work in guarding them should be easier.

It seemed a lame explanation, but no other was given. Galvez, taking hold of the doctor's arm, conducted him to a distance of two or three hundred yards; and, once more laying him along the ground, stood over him in the attitude of sentry. All this was mysterious and fear-inspiring, as much to Don Valerian—who

was now alone—as to Don Prospero, who had been taken apart.

Miranda was not left long to his meditations. In a few seconds after, the place of his friend and fellow-captive was occupied by his captor and enemy. Gil Uraga stood beside him.

There was a quick interchange of glances: on the side of Miranda defiant; on that of Uraga triumphant; although the expression of triumph appeared to be held in check; as if to await some event, before showing itself in more savage determination.

It was the first time Uraga had vouchsafed speech to his former commanding officer—the first time since making him his prisoner.

‘Don Valerian Miranda,’ he began, ‘you will no doubt be wondering why I have ordered your fellow-captive to be taken apart from you. It will be explained by my saying, that I have some words for you I don’t wish overheard by any one—not even by your dear friend, Don Prospero.’

‘What words, Gil Uraga?’

‘I have a proposal to make to you.’

Miranda remained silent, awaiting it.

‘I may first tell you,’ continued the ruffian, ‘though doubtless you know it already, that your life is in my power; that if I now put a pistol to your head and blow out your brains, there will be no calling to account. If there was any danger of it, it can be avoided by giving you the benefit of a court-martial. Your life is forfeit; and our military laws—as you are aware—can be stretched a little just now—to meet your case.’

‘I am aware of it,’ said Miranda, his patriotic spirit touched by the reflection; ‘I know the despotism that now rules my unfortunate country can do anything; and would, without respect either for law or constitution.’

‘Just so,’ assented Uraga; ‘and for this reason do I approach you with a proposal.’

‘Speak it, then. I am your prisoner—powerless—and therefore cannot help listening. Speak it, Gil Uraga, without farther circumlocution.’

‘Since you command me to avoid circumlocution, I will obey you to the letter. My proposal is this: that in exchange for your life—which I

have the power to take, and also to save—*you will give me your sister.*’

Miranda writhed within his raw-hide fastenings, till the cords almost cut through his skin. Withal, he was silent ; his emotion being too intense to permit of speech.

‘Don’t mistake me, Don Valerian Miranda,’ pursued his tormentor, in a tone intended to be soothing. ‘When I ask you to give me your sister, I mean it in an honourable sense. I wish her for my wife ; and to save your life she will consent to become so, if you only use your influence to that end. She would not be a faithful sister if she did not. I need not tell you that I love her ; you know that already. Accept the conditions I offer, and all will yet be well with you. I can even promise you the pardon of the State ; for my influence in high places is very different from what it was, when you knew me as your subordinate. It will enable me to obtain your pardon.’

Miranda still remained silent—long enough to rouse the impatience of him who dictated, and tempt the threat already intended as an alternative.

‘Refuse,’ he said, his brow suddenly clouding, while a gleam of sinister significance flashed out from his eyes, ‘and you see not another sun. By that now shining, you may take your last look at the earth ; for this night will certainly be your last upon it. You see those zopilotes on the cliff ? They are whetting their beaks, as if expecting a banquet. They shall have one ; and it will be on your body, if you refuse what I have offered. Accept my proposal ; or before to-morrow’s sun reaches meridian the vultures will be feeding upon your flesh, and the coyotes quarrelling over your bones. Answer me, and without faltering of speech. Let it be plain, Don Valerian Miranda—a “yes,” or a “no.”’

‘No !’ was the word shouted—almost shrieked—out by the man thus menaced. ‘No !’ he repeated ; ‘never shall I consent to that. I am in your power, Gil Uraga. Put your pistol to my head, and blow out my brains, as you have hinted ! Hang me to one of the branches above ; give me any kind of death—torture, if it so please you. It could not be such torture, as to see you the hus-

band of my sister. I shall at least be spared that ; you cannot hinder me. You cannot force my consent, nor gain hers upon such disgraceful conditions. My noble Adela ! I know she would rather see me die—and die along with me.'

'Ha ! ha !' responded Uraga, in a wild peal of mocking laughter, in which could be detected a trace of chagrin ; 'we shall see about that. Women are not so superbly stupid. They have a keener comprehension of their own interests. Surely I mean no harm to the señorita Adela. It is an honour I am offering her. Perhaps she may not reject it so disdainfully as you have done, Don Valerian. However, we shall soon see.'

Saying this, Uraga turned upon his heel, and walked off—leaving the chafed captive writhing in his ropes.





CHAPTER XXV.

A SISTER SORELTY TRIED.

THE marquee that gave shelter to Adela Miranda and her maid was not visible from the spot where the prisoners had been placed. The other tent stood between ; while some shrubbery farther concealed it.

But from the tenor of his last speech Miranda guessed that Uraga had gone thither ; and could also guess at his intentions.

He was right in both conjectures ; for the ruffian—chagrined by the denial he had received from the brother, and impatient of the delay—was determined on having an answer from the sister—point-blank, upon the instant.

He entered the lady's tent. Once inside, he muttered a direction, or rather request, for Con-

chita to withdraw. He did this with as much grace as the excited state of his feelings enabled him to command; excusing the act by saying, that he wished a word with the señorita alone; one, he was sure, she would not wish to be heard by any other ears than her own.

Roused from her despondent attitude, she looked up, her large round eyes expressing surprise, anger, and apprehension. The mestiza, disinclined to obey the request, glanced towards her mistress for a sign of instruction. The latter hesitated to give it. Only for an instant. It could serve no purpose to gainsay the wish of one who had full power to enforce it, and whose demeanour showed him determined on doing so.

‘ You can go, Conchita,’ said the young lady; ‘ I will call you when you are wanted.’

The girl went out with evident reluctance; and stopped not far from the tent.

‘ Now, señor,’ demanded Adela, on being left alone with the intruder, ‘ what have you to say to me, that I should not wish her to hear?’

‘ I pray you, señorita, do not begin with me

so brusquely. I approach you as a friend ; though hitherto I may have appeared only in the character of an enemy. I hope, however, that in time you will give me credit for good intentions. I am sure you will, when you know how much I am distressed by the position I am placed in. It grieves me, that my instructions from headquarters compel me to adopt some harsh measures with my prisoners ; but in truth, señorita, no discretion has been left me.'

'Señor,' returned Adela, casting upon him a look of scornful incredulity, 'you have said all this before. I thought you had something of importance to communicate.'

'And so I have, señorita. But it is of so unpleasant a nature, I hesitate to give speech to it.'

'You need not, señor. After what has passed, I am not likely to be nervous.'

Despite her courageous nature, and an effort to appear calm, her voice trembled as she spoke. There was an expression on the face of the man that boded some evil disclosure.

The suspense, however, was too painful to be

endured ; and in a tone still defiant, she made a farther demand for the promised communication.

‘Doña Adela Miranda,’ he said, speaking in grave measured voice, like a doctor delivering a prognosis of death, ‘it has been my duty to make your brother a prisoner—an unpleasant one, as I have said ; but, alas, the part already performed is nothing compared with what is now required of me. You say you are prepared for a shock. I am glad of it, señorita ; for what I’m going to say will cause you one.’

She no longer attempted to conceal the look of alarm now discernible in her large wondering eyes.

‘Say it !’ were the words that fell mechanically from her lips, as if forced from them by the intensity of her apprehension.

‘You are soon to be without a brother !’

‘What mean you, Colonel Uraga ?’

‘Don Valerian dies within the hour.’

‘You are jesting, sir. My brother has not been sick ? He is not wounded ? Why should he die ? *Madre de Dios !* do not torture me thus !—

O señor, unsay your words, or give an explanation of them.'

She spoke hurriedly, and with an incredulous stare at Uraga; while at the same time her hand, pressing upon her bosom, told that she too truly believed what he had said.

'Don Valerian is not sick,' continued the unfeeling wretch, 'nor yet has he received any wound. For all this, in less than an hour he must die. It has been decreed.'

'O merciful Virgin! You are mocking me, señor. His death decreed! By whom?'

'Not by me, I assure you. The military authorities of the country have been his judges, and condemned him long ago. They only waited for his capture to have the sentence carried out. This disagreeable duty has been intrusted to me; and I cannot disobey without losing my command, and perhaps risking my own life. My orders at starting were to bring the prisoners back to Santa Fé. But a messenger has just arrived—an Indian, you may have seen—with a despatch from the governor, in which he orders their immediate execution.'

I am commanded to have both of them shot, on the moment of receiving it.'

The tale was preposterous enough, and might have seemed to her what it was—a lie; but for her knowledge of many like cruel deeds in the history of her native land. Her own and her brother's experience at least rendered it not improbable. Besides, from within her tent she had seen the Indian José and his mule ride up to the camp-ground—both jaded, as if coming from a journey. This gave plausibility to that part about the bearer of a despatch—almost confirming it.

'*Dios de mi alma!*' (God of my soul) she cried out in the anguish of conviction, 'can this be true?'

'It is true.'

'O señor, you will not carry out this cruel sentence! It is not an execution—it is an assassination! Colonel Uraga, you will not stain your hands with murder? You will not—you *must* not!'

'I must obey orders.'

'My poor brother! Mercy! mercy! You can save him. You *will*?'

'I will!'

The emphasis with which these two words were pronounced brought a quick flush of gratefulness over her face; and she made a forward movement, as if to thank him by a pressure of the hand. She might have given it, but for the expression upon his features, that told her his consent had not been fully given, or his speech finished. There was more to come—two other words. They were—

'Upon conditions.'

It was a sad check to her bursting gratitude. Conditions! She knew not what they might be. She might have some suspicion. But she knew Gil Uraga, and could tell they would be hard.

'Name them, señor!' she said. 'If it be money, I will give it. Though my brother's property is to be taken from him—as we've heard—not so mine. I have wealth, and will give it—gold, lands, anything, to save dear Valerian's life.'

'All your wealth would not save him, señorita; but that will—that which would cost you nothing, only a grace—*your hand*.'

‘Señor?’

‘Yes, señorita. Your hand in holy wedlock. That is all that is asked.’

She started, as if a serpent had stung her; for she now comprehended all; even who it was for whom her hand was solicited, though she mechanically asked this question.

‘For one,’ he answered, ‘who loves you with his whole soul; who has loved you for long hopeless years—ay, señorita, ever since you were a schoolgirl, and he a rough wild youth, the son of a *ranchero*; who dared only gaze upon you from a distance. He is a peasant no longer, but one who has wealth, and upon whom the state has bestowed honour and command; one worthy to choose a wife from among the proudest in our land—even to wed with the Doña Adela Miranda. Señorita, behold him at your feet!’

On saying this, Uraga dropped upon his knees before her, and remained awaiting the response.

It did not come. She seemed as if petrified, and deprived of the power of speech.

Her silence gave him hope.

‘Señorita,’ he continued in an appealing tone, as if to strengthen the chances of an affirmative answer, ‘I will do everything to make you happy — everything a husband can. And remember your brother’s life. I shall be risking my own to save it. I have just spoken to him on the subject ; he does not object, but, on the contrary, has given his consent.’

‘My brother has given his consent?’ she cried out, with a look of incredulity ; ‘then, I must have it from his own lips !’

As she said this, she sprang past the kneeling suppliant ; and, before he could rise to his feet, or stretch forth an arm to detain her, she had glided out of the tent, and was hastening on to the spot where she supposed the two prisoners to have been placed.

With exclamations of anger and chagrin, Uraga went running after. His intent was to overtake and bring her back—even if he should have to drag or carry her.

He was too late. Before he could prevent it, she had reached the spot where her brother lay

bound ; and flung herself down by his side. Then, folding him in her embrace, she pressed her lips to his forehead, and moistened his cheek with her tears.

A tableau sufficiently heart-rending to have drawn tears from a statue !





CHAPTER XXVI.

THE LAST APPEAL.

A CHANGE had now taken place in the tableau under the tree. Where late were two captives lying along the earth, with a soldier standing sentry over them, there was now only one—Don Valerian, with his weeping sister upon her knees at his side, and Gil Uraga near by—his brow black, and his eyes shining like coals of fire.

His first impulse was to call upon Galvez, still keeping guard over Don Prospero at a distance, and order him to drag brother and sister apart. His next was to do this himself; and he was on the move to carry out the idea, when a third thought restrained him.

It was not humanity—there was not a spark of it in his bosom—but a hope suddenly con-

ceived. It was, that now the two were together he might renew his proposal with a better chance of its being entertained. He would reiterate his promises and redouble his threats.

He did not need to be told, that, in the short interval before his coming up, words had passed between brother and sister—in low tone, but loud enough for each to be made aware of what he had said to the other. On perceiving that the young lady had got beyond reach, and there was no chance of preventing the interview, he had slackened his pace, and they had gained time to exchange speech with one another. It needed not much. Each was already more than half prepared for the disclosure the other had to make; and Uraga, about to renew his proposal, could read refusal upon the faces of both.

It did not daunt, but only determined him to a form of menace, firmer and more fearful.

There was no one near enough to hear what would now be said—no one for whom he cared. The soldier and Don Prospero were far out upon the plain. They might catch the distant murmur

of words, but not so as to make out their meanings. What mattered if they did? Galvez was trustworthy; and, if things did not go well, his prisoner, Don Prospero, was doomed to death, and could not afterwards tell tales. If they did go well, he would not; for then his silence could be secured.

Roblez was sitting silent in the tent, smoking a cigar, and perhaps listening, though otherwise taking no part in the action of the play. His overhearing it did not signify anything to his associate in crime. Nor was much account made of Conchita, who stood trembling at a distance, afraid to approach under the angry frown of the grand colonel of lancers.

‘Don Valerian Miranda,’ began Uraga, on recovering his composure, as well as his breath, after the chase across the camp-ground, ‘I suppose the Doña Adela has told you what has passed between us? If not, I shall tell you myself.’

‘My sister has communicated everything,’ was the reply of Miranda; ‘even the falsehood by which you thought to fortify your vile proposal.’

‘Vile proposal, you call it?’ rejoined the other, upon whose cheek appeared no blush of shame for the deception he had practised. ‘Does the offer of saving your life, at risk of my own—rescuing you from a felon’s death—does this deserve the epithet with which you are pleased to qualify it? Come, Señor Miranda, you are wronging me, while trifling with your own interests—with your life, as you now know. I have been honest, and declared all. I love the señorita your sister, as you’ve known long ago. What do I ask of you? What this proposal you have termed vile? Only that she shall become my wife; and, by so doing, save the life of her brother. As my brother-in-law, it will be my duty—my interest—my pleasure to protect you. I have the power to do so, and you need not fear. The governor is indebted to me a pardon for services rendered. It shall be yours.’

‘Never!’ exclaimed Miranda, with a swelling fervour that caused a stretching of his cords; ‘never on such conditions!’

‘Does the señorita speak with the same de-

termination?' asked Uraga, fastening his eyes on Adela.

It was a terrible ordeal for the girl. A brother lying bound by her side; his death decreed; his end near; the executioner standing over him—for in this light did Uraga appear! Called upon to save him by promising to become the wife of this man—hideous in her eyes—detested as if he had been a common hangman; and knowing, or believing, that if she did not, in another hour, perhaps less, she would be gazing upon a blood-stained corpse—the dead body of the only near kin relative she had on earth—the only one dear, except another, whom she now believed to be also in danger! No wonder she trembled from head to foot, and hesitated to indorse the negative so emphatically pronounced by her brother.

Miranda noticed her indecision; and again spoke, quickly, but firmly as before.

'No—never! Dear Adela, do not think of such a thing. Do not fear, or falter; for I shall not. I would rather die a hundred deaths—by *garrota*, or on the rack—than see you the wife of

Gil Uraga. Ruffian! how dare you repeat your infamous proposal?"

"*Chingaro!*" hissed the man thus boldly defied, using one of the vilest exclamations known to the Spanish tongue—dictated by his roused rage—"you *shall* die, then! And after that, your sister may still be my wife, without your seeing it. Ay, perhaps something not quite so honourable—my *margarita!*"

The fearful meaning conveyed by the last word—well understood by Miranda—caused him to raise his body half upright; at the same time that he gave a wrench to the ropes around his wrists. The perspiration forced from him, by the agony of his soul, had already moistened the raw-hide thongs—to stretching. They yielded to the convulsive effort—leaving his hands free.

With a quick lurch forward he caught at the sword dangling by Uraga's side. Its hilt was in his hand; and in an instant he had drawn the blade from its scabbard.

Seeing himself thus suddenly disarmed, the lancer colonel hastily retreated, calling loudly for

help to Roblez, and the sentry who stood over Don Prospero.

Miranda, with his ankles still fast bound, could not follow. But with the sword-blade he quickly hewed the thongs asunder ; though the release came too late.

Just as he had got fairly upon his feet, the trampling of many hoofs was heard upon the grassy turf ; and immediately after, the returned lancers, with Roblez and the sentry, were around him.

He stood side by side with his sister, encircled by a *chevaux-de-frise* of lances, with cocked carbines behind them. There was no chance of escape, no alternative but surrender. After that—

He did not stop to reflect. A wild thought flashed across his brain—a terrible determination. To carry it out only needed the consent of his sister.

‘ Adela !’ he said, looking intently into her eyes, ‘ dear Adela ; let us die together ?’

She saw the sword resolutely held in his grasp, and that its point was not turned towards the assailants. She understood the appeal.

‘Yes, Valerian ; yes !’ came the quick response, with a look of despairing resignation, followed by the muttered speech, ‘Mother of God, take us to thy bosom ! To thee I commit my soul.’

Miranda upraised the blade, turning its point towards his sister. In another moment it would have been buried in her bosom, and afterwards in his own—a fearful episode.

It was not permitted to transpire ; though the soldiers had no hand in hindering it. Dismayed, or careless, they sat in their saddles without thought of interfering. But between their files rushed a form, in whose heart was more of friendship and humanity. It was that of a girl—slight, dark-skinned, with bright drapery flashing behind her.

The intruder was Conchita—opportunely to an instant.

Another second, and the fratricidal sword would have bereft her of a mistress, and still another of a master, both beloved.

Both were saved by her interference—by her

grasping the upraised arm, and withholding it from the blow.

Roblez, close following, assisted her—as also the dismounted lancer.

Soon the intending sororicide, and suicide, was disarmed; and once more bound, now more securely than ever; while his intended sister-victim was conducted back to her tent, and again placed under the guard of a trooper.





CHAPTER XXVII.

THE EXECUTION ORDERED.

EXASPERATED almost to madness, Uraga reentered his tent. He felt at the same time chagrin and shame—the former for the failure of his plan ; and the latter at having been disarmed and chased through his own camp, and with his own sword, by one who was his prisoner. All this in the presence of his following—for the lancers had come up in time to witness his discomfiture.

In his rage he determined to proceed at once to extremities—that last alternative pointed out by Roblez in the disposal of his prisoners—their death. He only summoned his adjutant to the tent, to take counsel with him as to the mode of their execution.

‘ You are resolved upon it?’ was the interrogatory of Roblez, who merely put it as a matter of form.

‘ *Carrambo!* an idle question after what has occurred. He shall die—they shall both die—within the hour.’

‘ Well, colonel, the thing is not so difficult now. This brisk little bit of an interlude has been all in your favour. It gives pretext and colour for their execution by court-martial; even though we two don’t quite constitute a quorum. The men have been witnesses of the mutiny, as we may call it; and won’t now talk of any secret motive on your part. In fact, our followers are themselves quite eager to have the business settled in that way, I believe. They would have settled with him when they rode up; but for fear of harming the señorita in his arms. The rascals have some gallantry; especially when the lady is good-looking. Now that she’s out of their sight, they’ll be ready for anything you like; and won’t mind a little manslaughter.’

‘ How shall we proceed?’

‘Oh, do that in the regular legal way. We two shall try the prisoners—we are supposed to be doing it now—and, of course, condemn them to death—make known the sentence to the men, and direct the regular form of military execution—*pasar por las armas*—let them be shot. I suppose you don’t particularly care to have them hanged?’

‘No, no. It isn’t worth while wasting time. Shooting will do. And I don’t want to lose much time about that. We must get back to the Del Norte—where I hope to find one more worthy of my vengeance. Go, then, *ayudante*; tell the men what we have decreed, and let them be preparing. Send the sergeant here. I shall give him directions myself.’

Roblez went off to execute the orders; and soon after, the non-commissioned officer appeared at the entrance of the tent.

‘Sergeant,’ said the colonel, stepping out, and facing towards the place where the prisoners were once more together under the tree, ‘there’s a little delicate business to be done, and you must assume the direction of it. Our two prisoners are to be

taken no farther. We have held court upon them ; and they are condemned to be shot. So direct the men to load their carbines, and be ready.'

The sergeant simply gave the salute of assent.

' Let all of them take part, except Galvez, who is to keep guard over the women. Tell him to take care, that neither of them gets out of the tent. Make sure that the flap is pulled down ; so that they may not see what's going on. Moreover, cause no more stir or noise than may be necessary. Have the men drawn up in line. I shall give the word myself.'

' Where are the prisoners to be placed, colonel ?'

' Ah ! I did not think of that. Let me see.'

Again turning his face towards the spot where his victims were lying—unconscious of the cruel destiny that was preparing for them, though perhaps not unsuspecting it—he ran his eye along the edge of the wood. In that direction the trees stood thickly—their huge trunks scarce distinguishable in the gloom caused by a dense overshadowing foliage, as well their own as that of numerous parasites that laced them together,

forming an almost impenetrable festoonery, that straggled down among the tops of the bushes growing beneath.

Advanced a little into the open ground two trees stood side by side, conspicuously apart from the others. They were cottonwoods of the largest size—their smooth stems having a diameter of several feet, and clear of parasitical climbers.

On these Uraga fixed his eyes; and for a second or two scanned them, as a lumberman would scrutinise a log he intended for the saw-mill.

The examination seemed to satisfy him; and, pointing them out to the sergeant, he said,

‘Place one against each of those trees—with his back to the trunk and facing the open ground. As they’ve been soldiers, we won’t disgrace the cloth by shooting them in the posteriors.’

After a grim smile at his ironical jest, he added :

‘Bind them in an upright position; which you can do by carrying a lazo around the trunks. That done, place your platoon in front here—out in the open, and about ten paces off. When you’ve got

your stage ready, come back to my tent, and report. I'll give the cue for the commencement of the play.'

With another flash of demoniac glee—that cast a strange lurid light over his countenance—he once more stepped inside his tent; while the sergeant went off to execute the grave orders that had been so flippantly given.

Meanwhile the prisoners were a prey to fearful apprehensions—Don Prospero perhaps more than his younger companion; for to Miranda, after the chapter of horrors just passed, death might have lost its terrors and almost seem a relief. He would no longer have regarded going out of the world, but for the thought of what might happen to her he must leave unprotected behind him. His saddest regret was: that he had not been quicker in handling that suicidal sword. Another moment, and his sister with himself would have been beyond the reach either of brutality or vengeance. He sighed as he thought of his failure to accomplish that dread despairing purpose; almost cursing Conchita for her well-meant, but what he

deemed mistaken, humanity. He could envy Colatinus : for Tarquin was still striding around, and there was no Brutus near.

He groaned as he reflected on the future—not his own, but that of his beloved sister. For himself, he knew it would not be long—at least, not in this world. He had no doubt that his end was nigh. Nor had Don Prospero much. They saw signs around them—movements about which there was little mystery. Plainly were there preparations for a military execution ; and who but they could be the intended victims ?

Had there been any uncertainty, it would have ended when they found themselves dragged away from the spot they had hitherto occupied, and strapped upright against two trees—the lancers, carbine in hand, forming line in their front.





CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE HAND OF GOD.

THE sun was slowly sinking down towards the summit of the Sierra Blanca, his golden beams deepening to a redder tint—as if to be in unison with the tragedy, soon to be enacted under their light, for which not only was the scene now set, but the characters already on the stage.

One arriving at that crisis on the bluffs that overlooked the valley of the Alamo, and glancing down upon the place where Uraga had pitched his camp, would have been struck with the tableau there presented to his view. At a single *coup d'œil* he would have seen two men standing with their backs to a couple of trees; fastened firmly to their trunks with raw-hide thongs; in front of them, some twelve paces off, nine other men,

dressed in the garb of Mexican lanzeros, ranged in single rank, and holding short guns in their hands—the man on the extreme right showing on his sleeve the cheverons of a sergeant.

Nearer to the bluff, and closer to the edge of the timber encircling the open space, a conical-shaped canvas tent, with two men standing beside it; both in the uniform of officers; that of one of them especially splendid, having on its shoulder-straps the insignia of a colonel; the other but the single bar of a lieutenant. To the right, and farther along the edge of the wood, a second tent, of oval shape, a small marquee; its entrance-flap close shut, with a lancer, long pennoned shaft in hand, and carbine slung *en bandoulière*, standing sentry in front of it.

Half way between the two tents a group of animals—three horses and a mule; all four saddled and bridled, slightly attached to the outstretched branches of the trees by a loop of their lariats.

Out upon the open ground, and near to the banks of a tiny rivulet that stole silently across

it, another and larger grouping of animals—ten or a dozen horses, with about half the number of mules; the horses also under saddle, though unbridled, and browsing on their trail-ropes; the mules likewise carrying their *alparejas*.

One other animate form—a human one—completes the tableau. A man of dark bronze complexion, wearing a coarse woollen *tilma*, tarnished sheepskin trousers, palm-plait hat, and raw-hide sandals—in short, an *Indio manso*. He is half standing, half crouching, behind the tent in front of which are the officers.

Such was the picture that would have been seen by any one looking down from the bluff above, at that moment, when Don Valerian Miranda and his fellow prisoner were about to suffer death by the decree of a cruel and unrelenting enemy.

The buzzards saw it from the high projecting perch, where they had all day been resting. It was now near sundown, and still they stayed, instead of flying off to their usual night roosting-place. Yet there was no noise, or turbulence, to tell them of an approaching conflict—with an en-

sanguined field to follow, strewn with corpses, the sight most grateful to their eyes. Something of this there had been but a short half-hour before ; and then they had flapped their sable wings, stretched out their naked coral-coloured necks, and uttered croaks of hopeful anticipation.

The short exciting scene, with its shouts and angry exclamations, had passed off without giving them a prey. But, although complete tranquillity seemed to be restored, they still remained ; as if the very silence told them that the storm would return.

It was indeed ominous, when coupled with the movements which the vultures could not avoid observing. Perhaps they comprehended their nature, and could predict the result. Whether or no, they kept their perch upon the rocks—despite the sinking of the sun, whose fast-reddening rays lent a lurid tint to their sable plumage.

To those moving about upon the plain below, the silence was equally solemn and impressive. They knew they were going to deal death to two of their fellow-creatures ; and there was not a man

among them who did not know, that it was a death undeserved.

Pirates and pilferers as they were—robbers in uniform every man of them—all knew, privates as well as officers, that they were about to commit an atrocious crime. The knowledge, however, did nothing to stay them. No throb of mercy or humanity, no thought of fair-play or justice, no fear or reflection about consequences, could restrain such hands as theirs ; most of them already stained with blood—the blood of their patriotic countrymen.

The silence with which every movement was being made was in no way mysterious. It was by direction of Uraga, who had his reasons. Enraged at his late discomfiture and disappointment, ruffian as he was, he might well be contented with the retaliatory step he was about to take. It might have intensified his gratification to make Adela Miranda a spectator of the execution ; and perhaps he would have done so, but that he did not choose to trouble himself with a scene, or anything that might cause delay. He was in haste to be gone from the place ; so that he might

elsewhere satisfy a vengeance far more bitterly felt. For that now dooming Valerian Miranda to a felon's death was not, by a tenth degree, so keenly felt, as the black unquenchable hatred he had for the man who had made that ugly scar on his cheek ; a brand that seemed to burn—pursuing him as the curse of Cain. Now, that he knew this man to be not only his victor in the field of war, but his conqueror in the court of love—now that he had hopes of being able to overtake him, and obtain revenge—his soul, absorbed with this thought, could brook no delay.

Simply to save time, therefore, he had given orders to his men to make their preparations quickly, and in silence.

His commands were obeyed to the letter. They who received them knew, that an act of disobedience would be rewarded by a bullet through the brain.

‘ Is everything ready, sergeant ? ’ he asked, as the soldier in sleeve-cheverons appeared at the entrance of his tent.

‘ Quite ready,’ was the prompt reply ; on re-

ceiving which the lancer colonel stepped outside the tent, followed by his adjutant; while the sergeant placed himself on the right flank of the line of dismounted troopers.

‘*Attention!*’ was the command that came from Uraga, delivered in a subdued voice, but loud enough to be audible to the firing-party.

‘*Make ready!*’

The carbines came to the ‘ready.’

‘*Take aim!*’

The guns were briskly brought to the level; their barrels glistened bronze-red under the setting sun; their muzzles pointed to the prisoners. Those who held them in hand but waited for the word ‘Fire!’

It came not. Before it could pass from the lips of Uraga, his nine lancers lay flat along the grass—their carbines, having escaped from their grasp, lying, still loaded, beside them!

It was as if they had been suddenly struck down by a *coup de soleil*—or the hand of God Himself.



CHAPTER XXIX.

A RESCUE.

THE stroke that had laid Uraga's troopers low—unexpected, and for a moment mysterious—was not a silent one. It was accompanied by a volley of shots; though the cracks were not those of carbines.

It was succeeded by a chorus of cries—almost as savage as those that might have proceeded from the throats of Comanches—along with the swish and crashing of branches, as if a herd of buffaloes were breaking their way through the brushwood.

All these sounds came from the wood, aback of the two trees to which the prisoners were attached; and for a time they who sent them could not be seen.

Only for a short interval—counting but seconds. Then, issued from out the shadowed obscurity at least two score men—great bearded men, who appeared giants beside the puny forms who had fallen to their death-dealing shots. Each carried a rifle ; that, now empty, was held in his left hand, while a bowie-knife or revolving pistol was clutched by his right.

The transformation-scene of a pantomime could not have been quicker than the change from the tableau we have late depicted. The eye of a critical spectator might have detected something of a parallelism between the imaginary stage-play and the real drama we are recording. The gaily-costumed lancers, with plumes and pennons—their splendidly uniformed chief, and his subordinate officer—the steeds in elaborate leathern caparison—all might have been likened to the gilded and gorgeous display that precedes the transformation ; while the sudden invasion of men in rough blanket coats, with buck-skin hunting-shirts and leggings, would correspond to the scenes of reality afterwards taking possession of the stage.

No such comparison occupied the mind of Colonel Gil Uraga, when he saw the line of men who waited his command to fire, suddenly drop down upon the grass. Wild amazement was his first impression, succeeded by stupefaction.

This was brief. The ring of the rifles—which he could not mistake for a platoon-fire from his own carbines—with the shouts that followed, quickly restored him to comprehension; and, although he knew not who were the enemies—could not even guess at them—he saw that he was *surprised*. He saw, too, that the surprise had been complete; that the conflict was over before it had commenced; that resistance would be idle; and that flight was the only chance left to him for keeping his skin whole. His adjutant perceived this at the same time, as also the lancer who had been left to guard the closed entrance of the marquee; and all three, with but a single thought in their minds—the *sauve qui peut*—rushed towards the group of horses that stood saddled behind the tents.

The trooper, being first up to the spot, had

first choice. In a despairing struggle up that ladder, which leads between life and death, discipline oft gives way ; and the colonel may be kicked down by the corporal. Imbued with this idea, and availing himself of its doctrine, the soldier picked the biggest and best horse of the trio—leaving the other two to his officers.

Uraga, with a curse, sprang upon the back of the mustang mare—Roblez being thus left to his own proper mount.

In half a score of seconds all three were spurring in among the trees ; and, despite stray bullets whistling past their ears, they seemed likely enough to escape.

Two of them did get clear : Uraga and Roblez. The trooper was brought to a stand, or rather the horse he was riding ; for he himself, before entering the wood, fell headlong among the bushes that skirted it.

It was a pistol-bullet that produced this effect ; and he who held the weapon in his hand was the foremost of those who had charged out of the timber. Almost alongside of him was another

man, of much greater size, and showing equal eagerness to press forward. They were Frank Hamersley and Walt Wilder. The two were several paces in advance; but Captain Haynes, Nat Cully, and others of the Rangers, were not far behind them.

On first breaking out from the bushes, the young Kentuckian glanced anxiously around; but not as if searching for an enemy. The expression in his eye was more like that of a man suffering from keen apprehension. Something of a similar kind could be detected in the orbs of the hunter.

An instant after, and it was gone—the eyes of both sparkling with a supreme joy. Two female figures, rushing out of the now unguarded marquee, were at once recognised; and in another moment the arms of the two men were enfolded—each around his own—while words and kisses were rapidly exchanged.

All this action, dilatory as its description may seem, did not occupy more than sixty seconds. The rifle-fusillade that had swept down the firing-party as with the blade of death—the forward

charge of the Texans—the retreat of Uraga and Roblez—the two girls springing forth from the tent, and falling into the arms of their lovers—all these incidents were like the quick changing scenes of a dream—a series of fleeting apparitions.

The last was still present before the first had passed out of sight; for, while Hamersley yet held his rescued betrothed in his embrace, his eye caught sight of three retreating horsemen, and recognised the foremost of them as Gil Uraga. A host of memories came crowding upon him: the cowardly insult but half wiped out by the duel at Chihuahua; his despoliation; the death of his faithful employees and companions—whose blood, spilt upon the sandy plain, seemed to cry to him for atonement; the injury done to a dear friend; that attempted, and almost carried out, against one still dearer—against her whose white arms were now around his neck; all these injuries, coming into his mind and before his eyes, and the author of them hastening to make his escape! He must not go unpursued.

Rapidly withdrawing his arms from the tender

embrace, Hamersley faced towards the trio of retreating horsemen. He was too late to take aim at the foremost; but a flash of intuitive, or instinctive, thought told him to fire at the hindmost—who chanced to be the soldier, riding off on his own horse.

The trooper dropped dead among the bushes; while the horse, released from guidance, came trotting in between the two tents. Hamersley, springing towards him, caught hold of the bridle; at the same time whispering a word in his ear, that brought back old recollections—acknowledged by a loud neigh, and then by an almost continuous whimpering—expressive of equine joy.

‘*Dios de mi alma!*’ exclaimed Adela, as she saw her lover preparing to spring into the saddle—at the same time divining his intention. ‘Do not go, Francisco! O, do not go! Let the wretch escape. He is not worthy of your vengeance!’

‘Dearest Adela; it is not vengeance, but justice. I parted from you once before to pursue him. Urged by the same thought, I must go again. Do not stay me! Be assured that this

time I shall be more successful. Something tells me, it is my destiny to bring to punishment this detestable criminal—perhaps the greatest upon earth. I must go.'

' Thar's two on 'em, Frank—two ter one agin ye; an' no anymal for me to go 'long wi' ye. Thar's the Rangers catchin' at thar critters; but they won't git up in time. Ef ye must go, I'll jump on this ole mule hyar, as hez bin rud by Concheeter, an' see what I kin do.'

'No, Walt; you stay and take care of Conchita—with my dear Adela. What if there are two of these scoundrels, or a dozen?—See, dearest, your brother is calling for you. Go to him! A kiss? *Adios!*'

Snatching the kiss, and tearing himself away from the arms so reluctant to let him go, he sprang into the saddle; and, in a few bounds of his horse, was lost among the trees.

Walt—making over the charge that had been intrusted to him to one of his old Ranger comrades—mounted the mule, and rode after: but the disparity between the small quadruped and

its colossal rider made it very improbable he would be in time to render succour to the impetuous Kentuckian.

Soon after, several Rangers followed; having caught and bitted the troopers' horses—their own having been left in the wood, too far behind to be available for the chase.

The others remained upon the ground—spectators of a tender scene between the man who had been so unexpectedly rescued, snatched from the very jaws of death, and his sister—whose noble affection had prompted her to share death with him, rather than submit to dishonour.





CHAPTER XXX.

THE CHASE.

By the time Hamersley had got his steed fairly astretch, the fugitives were out of sight, though yet only a few hundred yards ahead: for the scenes and speeches recorded had occupied but a few seconds. It was only the screen of timber that concealed the two men who were retreating from him.

He felt confident of being able to overtake them. He knew his pure-blooded Kentucky hunter was more than a match for any Mexican horse, and could soon come up with the mustang mare and the other animal. If they should separate, he would of course follow the former.

As he rode on, he saw they could not get far apart. There was a sheer precipice on either side

—the bluffs that bound the creek-bottom. These would keep them together; and in an encounter he would have both to deal with.

The ground was such that they could not well escape him, except by superior speed. He could see the cliffs on each side, to their bases. There was not enough underwood for a horseman to hide in. He hastened on therefore, confident he still had them before him. In ten minutes more he was quite sure of it: they were in sight!

The timber tract, through which the chase had hitherto led, abruptly terminated; a long grassy mead, of over a mile in length, lying beyond; and beyond this the trees again obstructed the vista up the valley. The retreating horsemen had entered upon this meadow land, but had not got far over it, when Hamersley spurred his horse out of the trees behind them; and pursuer and pursued were in full view of each other.

It was now a tail-on-end chase; all three horses going at the greatest speed to which their riders could press them. But it was soon evident to all, that the large American horse was rapidly

gaining upon the Mexican mustangs ; and if no accident should occur, he would soon be on their heels, or alongside of them.

Hamersley clearly perceived this ; and, casting a glance ahead, appeared to calculate the distance to where the timber again commenced. To overtake them before they could reach it, was the thought that was uppermost in his mind. Once among the tree-trunks, they could go as fast as he ; for there the superior fleetness of his horse would not count. Besides, there might be thick underwood to give them a chance of concealment.

He must come up with them, then, before they could reach the cover ; and to this end he once more pressed his animal both with spurs and speeches.

At this moment the pursued men, looking behind, saw that there was but *one* in chase of them. There was now a long stretch of the open plain in his rear, and no other pursuer upon it. Brigand though he was, Roblez was a man of real courage, though his colonel was not. At bottom, Uraga was a *bavard*. Still, there were two of

them, in full health and strength ; both carrying swords, and Roblez a pair of dragoon pistols in his holsters. Those belonging to Uraga were nearer to the hand of Hamersley ; having been left in the saddle, which the robber, in his hasty retreat, had been hindered from occupying.

‘*Carajo !*’ cried Roblez ; ‘there’s but one of them after us. The others haven’t had time to get mounted, and won’t be up for a while. It’s some rash fool, who’s got your horse under him. Let’s turn upon him, colonel.’

The coward, thus appealed to, could not protest ; and in an instant the two wheeled their animals round, and with blades bared awaited the approach of the pursuer.

In a dozen more strides of his great horse, he was on the ground ; and Uraga now recognised him as his antagonist in the Chihuahua duel—the man he hated above all others upon earth.

This hatred, however, intense as it was, did not at that moment give him any grand courage. In the eye of Hamersley, as he came close, Uraga saw the terrible expression of the avenger.

Something whispered him that his hour was come; and it was with a shrinking heart, and an arm half palsied by despair, that he awaited the encounter.

As already said, the two Mexican officers carried swords, cavalry sabres; and against these the Kentuckian had no weapon for parrying or defence. He was but poorly armed for the unequal combat—having only a bowie-knife, a Colt's revolver with one chamber already emptied, and, as a *dernier resort*, the single-barrelled dragoon-pistols in the holsters.

Quickly perceiving his disadvantage, he checked up his horse before coming too close; and with his revolver took aim at the nearest of his antagonists, which was Roblez.

The shot told—tumbling the lancer lieutenant out of his saddle, and making more equal the chances of the fight.

But there was no more fighting, nor the show of it; for Uraga, on seeing his comrade fall, and once more catching sight of that avenging glance, that glared upon him as if direct from the eye of

Nemesis, wrenched the mustang round, and rode off in the wildest retreat, his sword, held loosely, almost dropping from his grasp.

Soon it did drop ; for Hamersley, following in close pursuit, fired a second shot from his revolver. The bullet struck the extended sword-arm ; the naked blade whirled out, and fell with a ring upon the meadow turf.

Uraga still rode on, without looking back. He had not even the courage to face towards his enemy. He thought only of getting to the timber, in a despairing hope of there finding shelter.

It was not his destiny to reach it. The avenger was too close upon his heels. The head of his horse was swept by the mustang's tail with its long white strands spread comet-like behind.

Once more Hamersley's revolver was raised, its muzzle pointed at the spine of the retreating coward. The pulling of a trigger would have sent the bullet into his back. But it was not pulled.

Whether from whim, pity, or some other motive, the pursuer quickly transferred the pistol

to his left hand ; and then, forcing his horse into a long leap forward, he laid hold of the lancer colonel with his right. Grasping him by the waist sword-belt, and jerking him out of the saddle, he flung him with a violent effort to the earth ; then, reining up, with the revolver once more grasped in his right hand, he cried out :

‘ Lie there, you ruffian, and keep still ! I have several shots to spare, and if you attempt to stir, one of them will quiet you.’

The admonition was not needed. Uraga, stunned by the fall, for a time made no movement. Before he had come to himself, the Rangers had ridden up, with Walt Wilder on the Mexican mule, and made prisoners of the two wounded men, neither of whom had been killed in the encounter.

Better for them if they had : for they were now in the hands of those who had already doomed them to death.

Their fate was inevitable.



CHAPTER XXXI.

A NEW MODE OF HANGING.

THE sun had not yet gone down, though his rays had assumed a ruddier hue, as they lingered over the camp-ground now stained with blood. The buzzards still kept their places upon the cliff, nor showed sign of leaving for the night. Now sure of a banquet, they seemed determined to stay there till morning.

The pursuing party had returned with their prisoners, who lay upon the ground, encircled by a surrounding of Rangers. These seemed to hold consultation.

Hamersley was not among them, or taking any part in their proceedings. He was inside the marquee, with company more congenial. By his side was Adela, Colonel Miranda, and the doctor,

reclining near—but no longer in bonds. Conchita was moving out and in, at intervals communicating with her gigantic *fiancé*; who, having business with his old friends the Rangers, could not give her the whole of his time.

The party inside the tent, if not jubilant, were at least happy. Their sudden and unexpected delivery, from what had so late appeared certain death to some of them, could yet scarcely be realised. It was like being all at once awakened from some horrid dream—its horrors still hovering around them.

As they continued to converse, however, exchanging narratives and explanations, the dark shadows gradually dissipated, and their thoughts became restored to their natural channel. Those of the young Kentuckian now coursed in the sweetest of all currents; for upon his breast lay confidently a beautiful head, with a soft arm resting upon his shoulder; while into his eyes gleamed other eyes, overflowing with love and gratitude. There was no false modesty nor reserve, even in the presence of a brother; since that proximity

had been already sanctified by his consent, and was now more than ever sealed by his concurrence. Inside the tent it was a tableau of love, wreathed with fraternal affection.

Far different was the scene outside—a picture of turbulent passion. There a new tragedy was about to be enacted: the stage was being set for it.

‘Well, boys, what are we to do with them—shoot or hang?’

The interrogatory came from the captain of the Rangers. It is scarce necessary to explain its import, or to say that it referred to the two prisoners just captured.

‘*Hang!*’ was the response emphatically spoken by more than a score of voices.

‘Shootin’s too good for skunks sech as them,’ was the commentary added by the man in the green blanket coat.

‘They oughter be sculped an’ quartered too,’ appended Cully.

‘A leetle torture wouldn’t do no harm,’ suggested a still more severe speaker. ‘Durn ‘em, they desarve it!’

‘No, no,’ said Captain Haynes; ‘enough if we string them up. Well, I suppose that’s agreed to. You all say hang?’

‘*Hang!*’ came the wild word, again issuing simultaneously and unanimously—not a single voice dissenting.

‘Get the traps ready, then,’ directed the Ranger chief. ‘You, Cully—you and Wilder—look around, and choose the best place.’

‘Thar’s a pick place,’ suggested Walt; ‘them ar two trees whar they hed thur victims strapped up for the shootin’. Thar’s a branch for both o’ ‘em, so as they needn’t be crowded in makin’ tracks torst etarnity. I reck’n them limbs air high enuf. What d’y say, Nat Cully?’

‘Jest the thing,’ responded Cully; ‘kedn’t be better ef the sheriff o’ Pike County, Massoory, hed rigged it up for a gallis. Hyar, fellurs; look out a kuttle o’ trail-ropes, an’ fetch ‘em up!’

The trail-ropes were soon forthcoming, and flung over the two limbs that stretched horizontally out from the trees, to which Miranda and Don Prospero had late been lashed. There needed

no eye to be formed for the running-noose. The iron rings of the lazos furnished this ; and in less than ten minutes everything was ready for carrying Judge Lynch's sentence into execution.

‘Who's to haul up?’ was the next question asked.

A score of men sprang forward, crying out with one accord :

‘*I will.*’

In fact, every man upon the ground seemed willing to take hand in this duty; which, under other circumstances, would have been to most of them, not only disagreeable, but disgusting. The tales they had heard of atrocities committed by the prisoners—the clear evidence of them in their possession—had made a profound impression upon the minds of the Rangers; who, although themselves rough men, and but little troubled by delicate sensibilities, were nevertheless true to the common instincts of humanity.

These instincts now stirred them to what they looked upon as only a just retribution of crime—with no motives of mere personal revenge. Walt

Wilder may have been an exception to this on recalling the slaughter of his comrades of the caravan; and still more Hamersley. But the latter was inside the tent, taking no part either in the trial or execution. Nor did Miranda or the doctor show any sign of interest in it—notwithstanding all the persecutions they had suffered from the common enemy. They could not help knowing what was going on without; but they knew also they were not wanted.

‘Boys!’ said Nat Cully, seeing so many volunteers around him, ‘thar ‘pears no stint o’ hangmen among ye; but I reck’n I must dissapeint ye all. These Mexikin skunks don’t desarve to be heisted up to etarnity by a freeborn citizen o’ the Lone Star State. It wuld be a disgrace to a Texun to be the executiener o’ eyther o’ ‘em.’

‘What would you do? Somebody must pull them up.’

‘ ‘Taint need-cessary. They kin be strung up ‘ithout air a hand techin’ trail-rope.’

‘How? how?’

‘Wal, thar’s a way, I’ve heern they sometimes

use themselves. Jest fotch up them two ole mules wi' the pack-seddles on 'em, an' this chile 'll instruct ye how. Ye kin take off the seddles: them ain't needed.'

Three or four men hastened to execute the order; and the mules were quickly led up, and stripped of their *alparejas*.

'Now, conduck hyar the kriminals!' was the next command of Cully, who, by general consent, was acting as master of the ceremonies.

The two were brought upon the ground, half led, half dragged. Neither spoke a word, nor even by look made any appeal for mercy. They knew it would have been idle. There was not a countenance around them but told this, as plainly as if proclaimed in the most emphatic speech. Their uniforms were torn, and stained with blood. They looked very like a brace of wolves, taken in a trap—Roblez, like the large gray wolf, savage, but not yielding; Uraga, cowed, and trembling like a coyote.

'Mount 'em on the mules!' was the next order from Cully.

It was instantly obeyed ; and the two men were set astride of the hybrids.

‘Now fix the snares roun’ thar thrapples, an’ make the other eends fast to the limbs overhead. Draw ’em jest tight, ’ithout streetchin’.’

The directions were carried out ; and the criminals were now seated on the mules, each with a noose around his neck—the rope to which it belonged carried taut to the branches above, and there made fast by several warpings.

‘Now, Walt, I reck’n you an’ me kin spring the trap. Air yur pistol loaded ?’

‘It air.’

‘Wal; you take the right-hand critter, I’ll take the left un. When I gie the word, let crack right inter the anymal’s gullet. You know whar.’

‘All right, ole hoss !’

There was a short interval of silence. It was a silence profound ; such as always precedes the falling of the drop on the scaffold of a gallows. The chirrup of a tree-cricket, or the rustling of a leaf, would have been a loud noise at that instant.

So ominous was the stillness, that the vultures

on the cliff craned out their naked necks, as if to inquire the cause. They started on hearing a voice below shout out the word 'Fire!' and most of them took wing at the reports of two pistol-shots reaching them from the same direction.

They were shots that had both been fired with fatal aim. When the smoke cleared off, two mules were seen lying dead upon the ground. Over each was the body of a man, with a rope round his neck, swinging to the branch of a tree; a slight tremor in his frame, and a convulsive movement of the limbs, showing him to be in the last throes of asphyxia—by hanging.





CHAPTER XXXII.

WHAT CAME AFTER.

THE last act in our drama has been recorded—the last that may be deemed worthy of detail. After so many episodes of an exciting and sanguinary character, the resultant tranquil scenes would appear tame; though it may interest the reader to have a brief epitome of them.

Of the characters killed upon the stage he will not care to know more. They are dead, and cannot be resuscitated—even if deserving it, which none of them did. For, in this tragical tale, Nemesis, in dealing out vengeance and death, allied herself with justice. The fallen merited their fate; all but the unfortunate victims of the caravan-attack, and the Rangers who had succumbed to Tenawa spears and shafts. But as they, like the super-

numeraries of a theatre, lived nameless and died unknown, their death may stir our sympathies without appealing to the depths of sorrow.

The reader, as we have said, may desire to know something of the after-history of those who survived. This was not without vicissitudes of an interesting nature, although not sufficiently exciting to serve for the pages of a modern romance which rigorously exacts the sensational. It could scarce give him a sensation to be told, that Colonel Miranda, with his sister, Don Prospero, and the Indian damsel Conchita, accompanied Frank Hamersley and Walt Wilder in their return across the plains; that Captain Haynes and his Rangers formed their rough but gallant escort as far as Nacogdoches, near the eastern border of Texas; and that there Walt Wilder bade a characteristic adieu to his old roving *camarados*.

And it would be tame to relate how the party afterwards proceeded on to Natchitoches, and there took steamboat to the mouth of the Red River; though, to the young Kentuckian and the ex-ranger, it might have been very pleasant to reflect that,

upon one of the remote sources of this same stream each had found what Byron so vainly longed for :

‘A desert for a dwelling-place,
With one fair spirit for his minister.’

A marriage-scene or ceremony will always have a certain interest, especially for the fair sex ; but it is rare that this rises to the sensational, except in the case of princes and princesses.

Still, that occurring in a country church in the ‘Blue-grass’ district of Kentucky—where Frank Hamersley stood before the altar—was not without some notable features, fairly deserving of record. That the bluest blood of the Blue-grass country assisted at the ceremony, is an ordinary chronicle ; but it is not every day that three couples take Hymen’s oath at the same time ; which on this occasion came to pass.

Frank Hamersley made the usual vow to protect his beautiful Adela ; while his colossal comrade, Walt Wilder, swore in the same strain as regarded Conchita ; and, had the clergyman not stopped him, would have added some unique as-

severations of his own, to strengthen or clinch the promise of fidelity.

The reader, expecting only a double marriage, has been told that it was *triple*, and will be inquiring who were the other two devotees at the hymeneal shrine ?

One was a handsome man, of dark complexion and Spanish features, bearing a marked likeness to Hamersley's bride. No wonder ; since he was her brother. Nor was it any greater wonder that the tall fair girl by his side, on whose finger he shortly after slipped a plain gold ring, bore an equally striking resemblance to Hamersley himself—being his sister.

Thus had it come about. If the conquest of the Mexican maiden over Hamersley's heart had been quick—almost instantaneous—not less so was that of the Kentucky girl over the affections of Valerian Miranda. On each side, therefore, there was an equitable and agreeable *revanche*.

* * * * *

When we again saw these three couples together, it was far away from the 'Blue-grass' country

of Kentucky—though still within the territory of the United States.

They were standing upon the *azotea* of a splendid mansion that overlooked the town of Albuquerque. All six seemed as happy—if this could well be—as when arrayed in bridal robes at the altar of the Kentucky church. For Don Valerian, from his roof, could look over broad leagues—not acres—that were his own; now far surer of being his own, that a star-spangled flag waved over them, instead of that emblazoned with the *nopal*; while Hamersley saw encamped upon the plain below a caravan of wagons—his own—laden with rich goods, no longer in danger of being overtaxed by a despotic governor, or despoiled by prairie freebooters—whether real Indians or counterfeit.

It was a happy *reunion* on the roof of that New Mexican mansion; and the evening sun, from an unclouded sky, reflected his mellowed light upon cheerful and friendly faces—none more cheerful or friendly than that of Don Prospero, who was of the number.

The dear old doctor had been rewarded for his

devotion, both to friendship and freedom. His native land had lost its nationality—a loss the true patriot will never lament, when Liberty is the gain. It is only the petty partisan who cares to prop up a despotic independence.

Don Prospero was not of this kind. On the contrary, he triumphed in the event that had transferred his native province from the weak pilferers who had hitherto habitually plundered it, to the strong protecting power whose flag now waved over it.

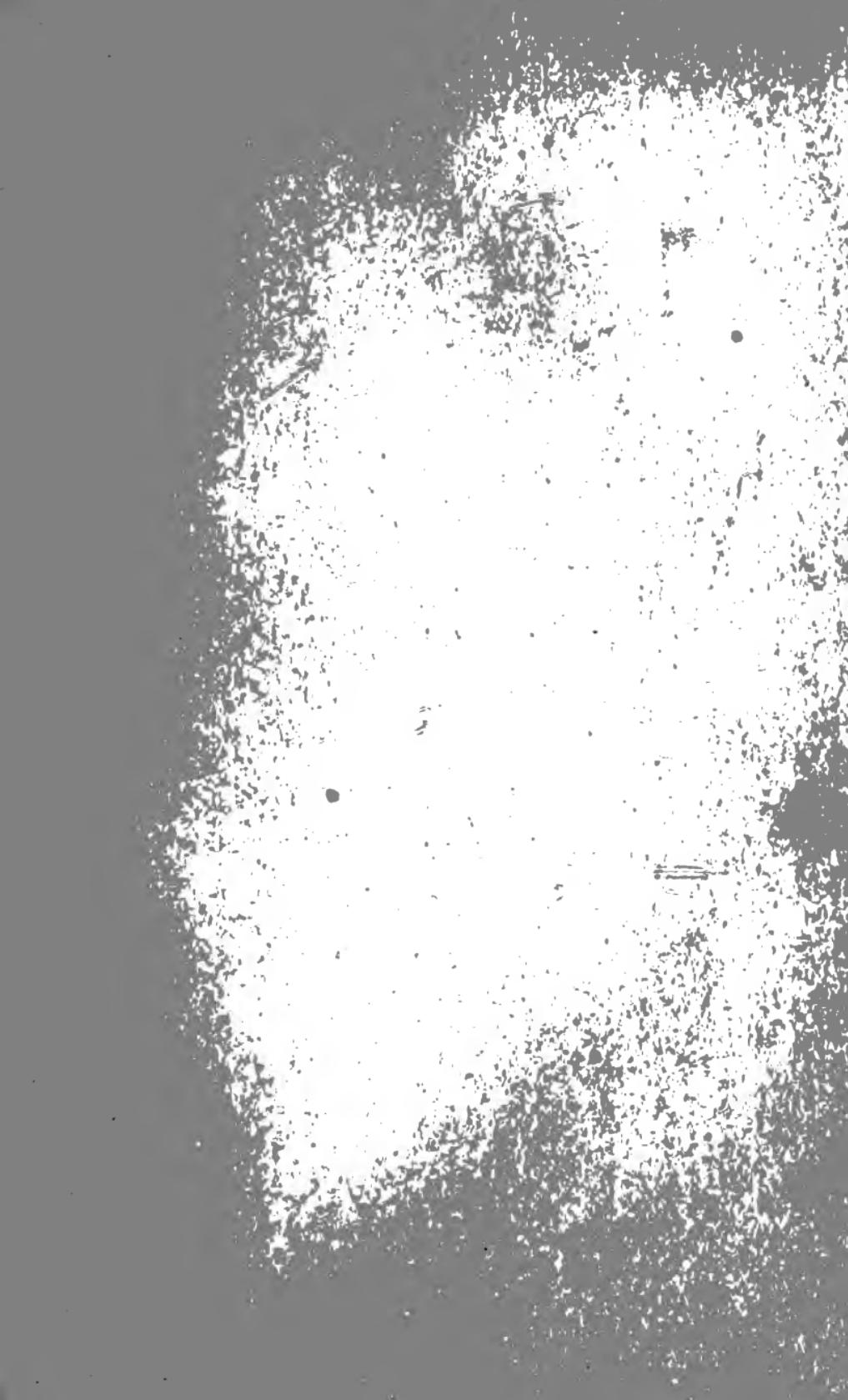
Without fear of interruption, he could now call upon the Doña Adela—and did—to attune her voice and guitar to that patriotic strain, so rudely interrupted in the LONE RANCHE.

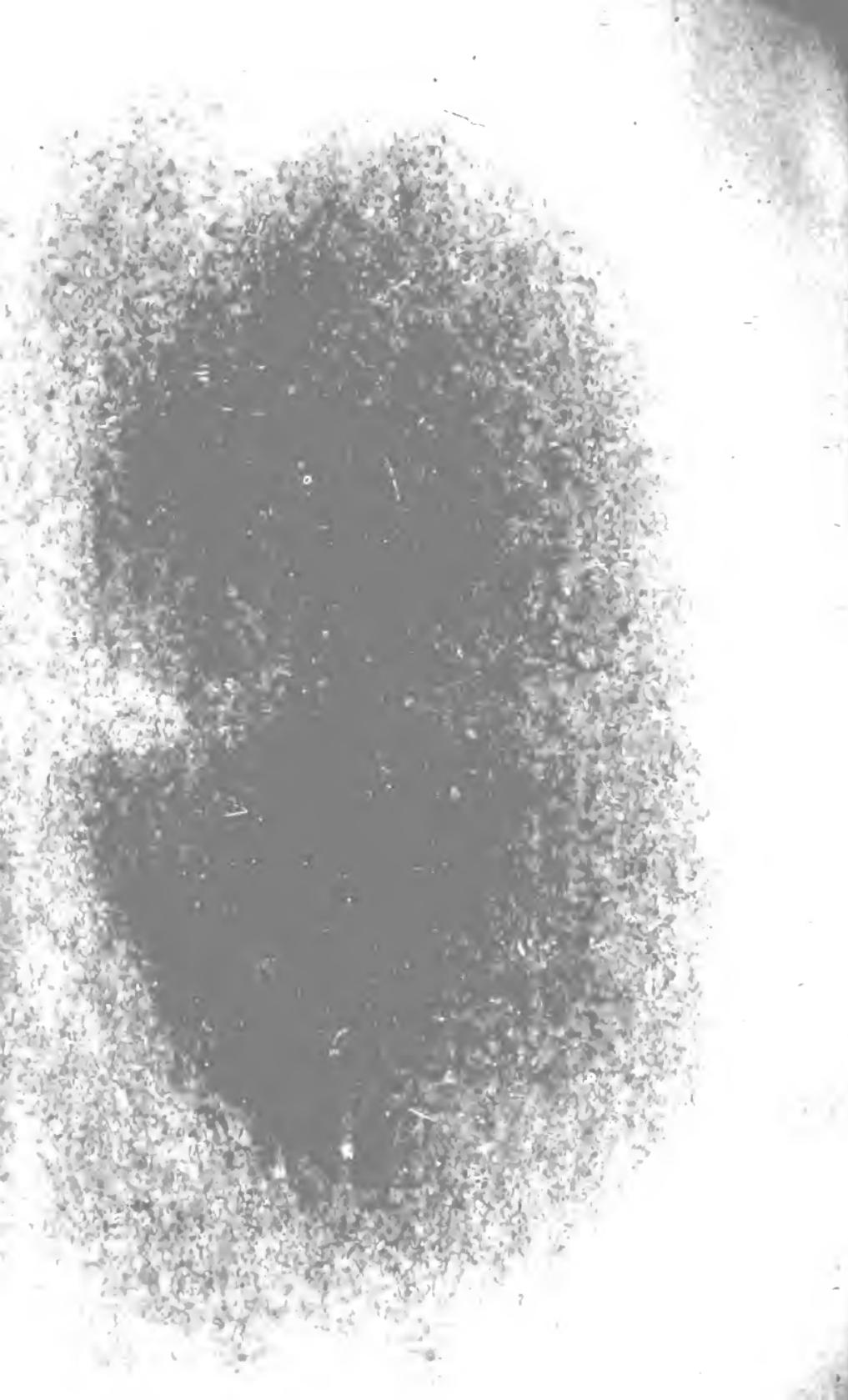
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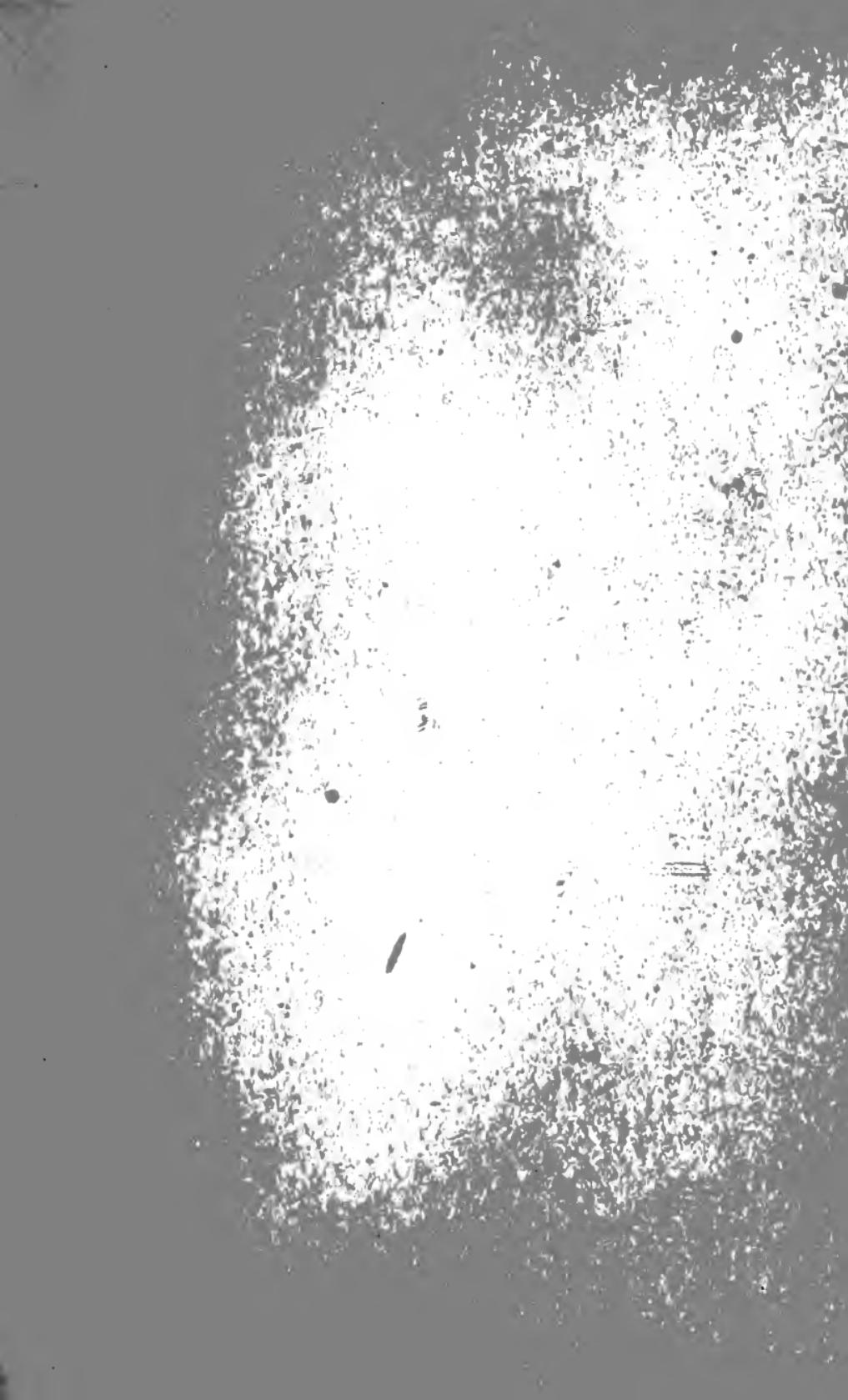
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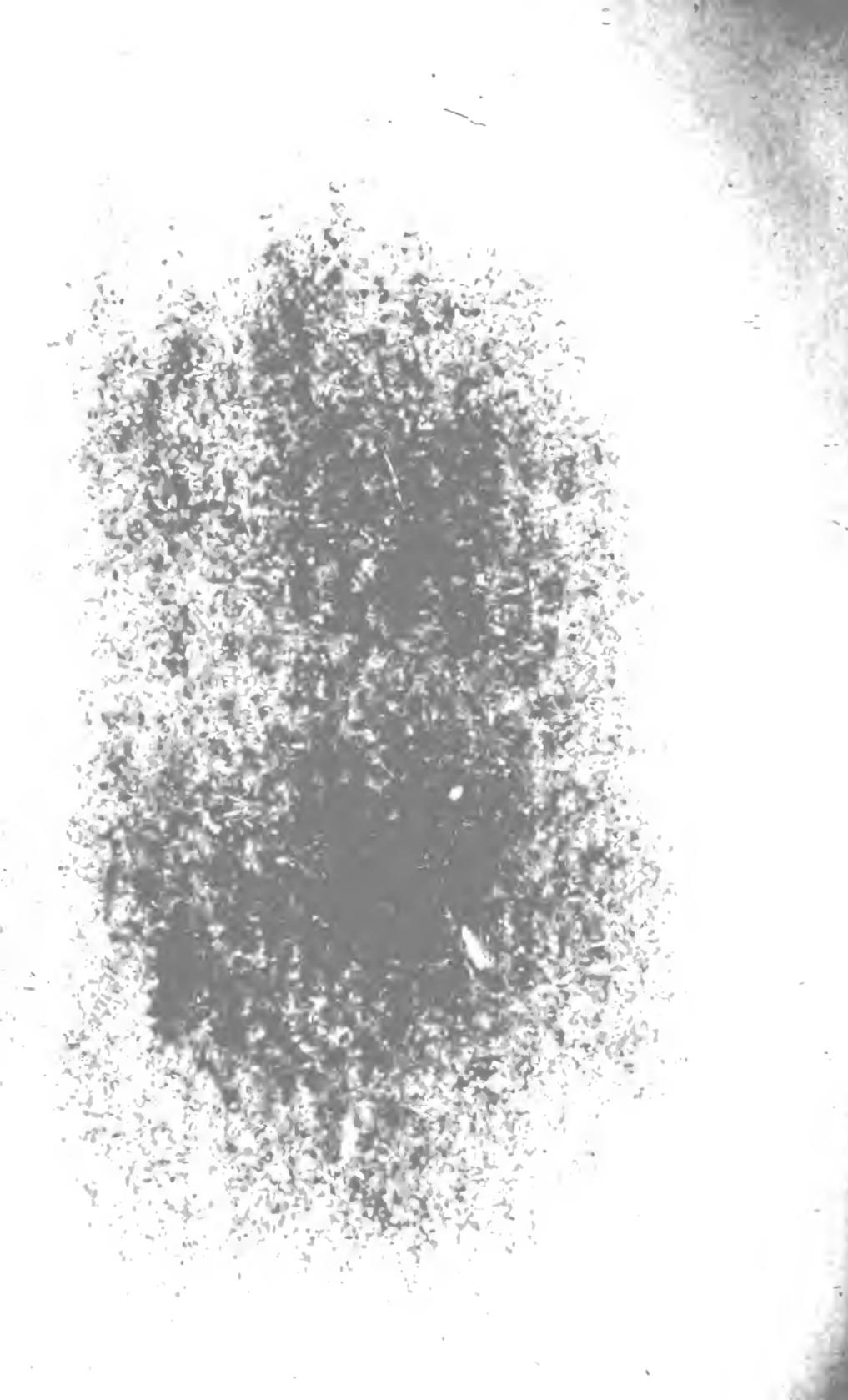
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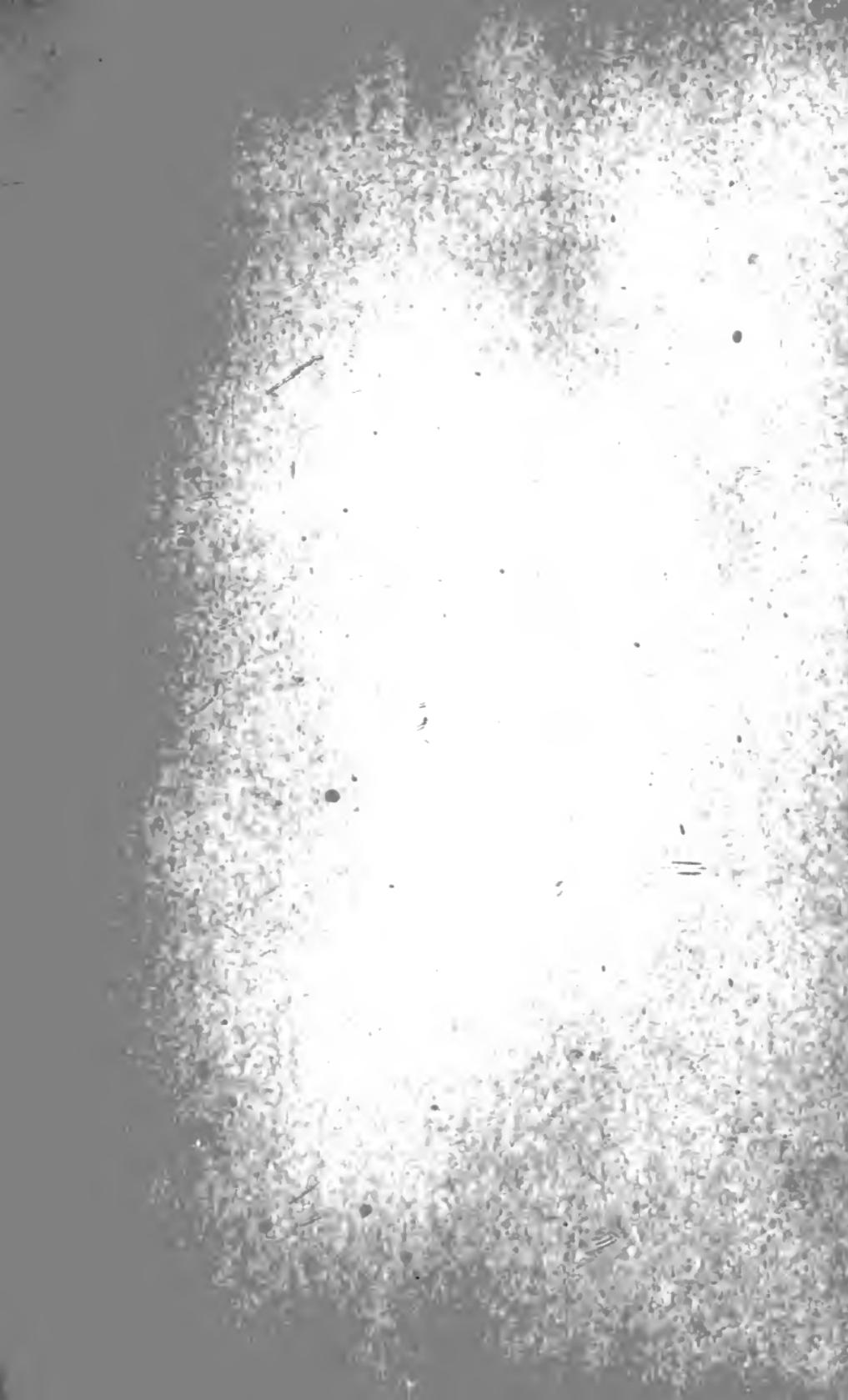


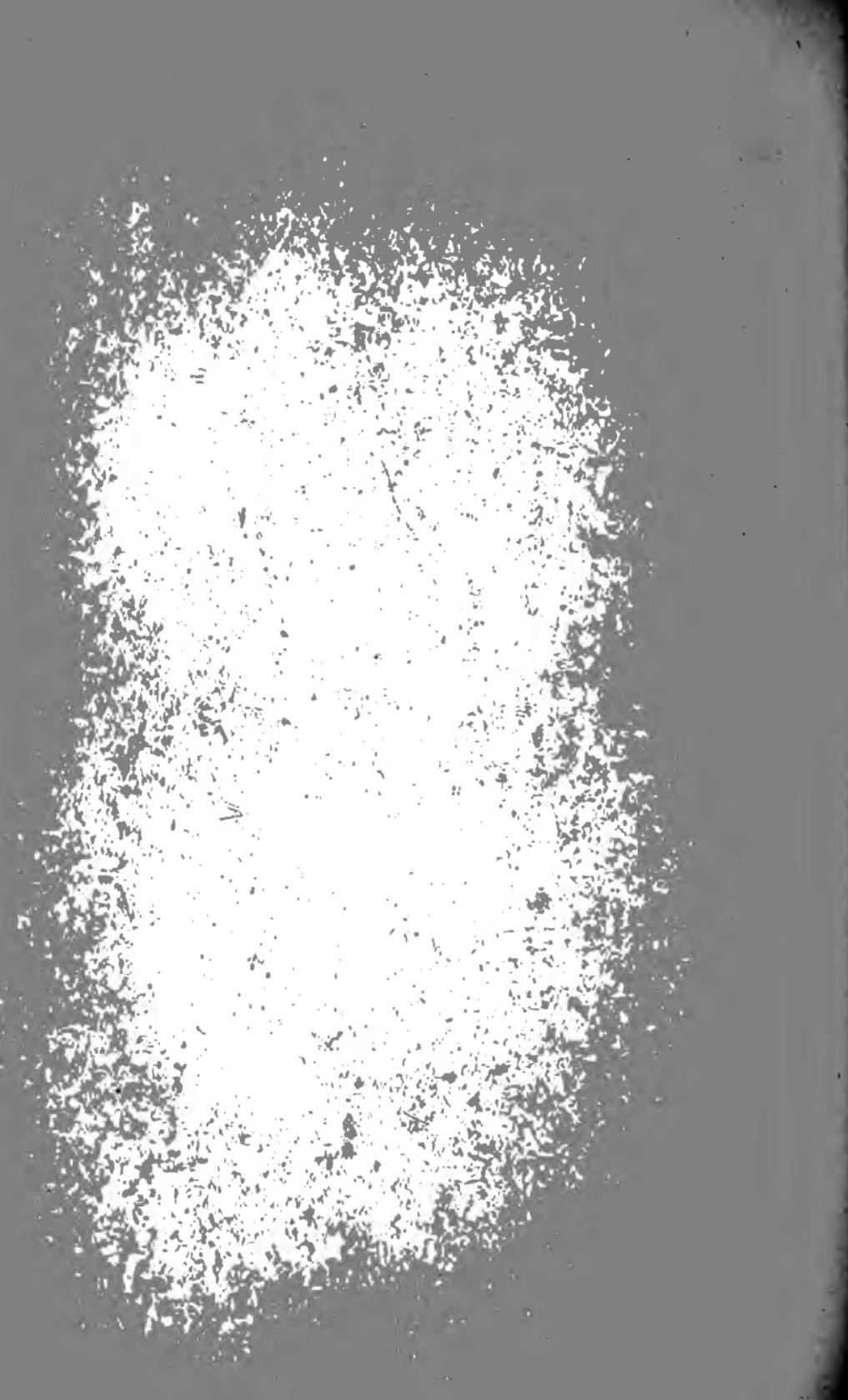


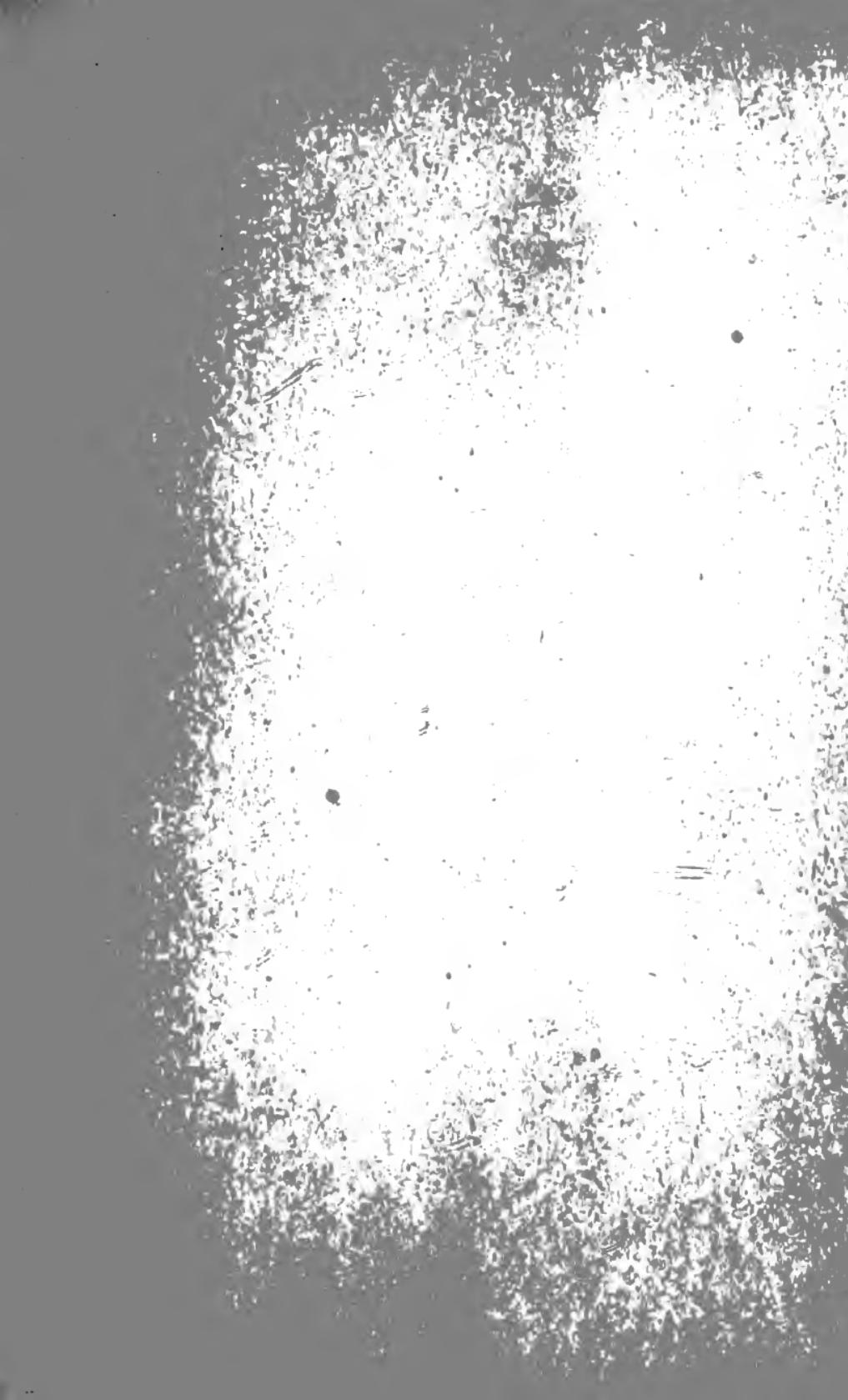
















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